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DU BOISGOBEY'S SENSATIONAL NOVELS.

VII.

THE CRIME

OF

THE OPERA HOUSE

BY FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY.

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THE CRIME OF THE OPERA HOUSE.

PART II.



I.

NOINTEL was a methodical young man. Military life had accustomed him to doing everything at its proper time in a strictly orderly manner. When he was in the army, after superintending the grooming of the horses, and the drill, he again became a man of the world, highly appreciated by all who knew him. Since he had left the service, he had continued to follow the same course, and his life was regulated as though he had charge of some business. He devoted at least three-fourths of it to an intelligent loitering about, by way of keeping himself well informed on all subjects; the rest being allotted to social duties, to friendship, and even to more or less dangerous, but invariably transient connections with the fairer sex.

Gaston Darcy's adventure occurred at a time when Nointel's heart was enjoying a long vacation. So he gladly seized hold of the opportunity to occupy his idle time, and come to the assistance of the dearest of his friends. For forty-eight hours he had entirely given himself up to the defence of Berthe Lestérel's interests; he had devoted himself soul and body to his task, which he conducted with the same zeal and care that he would have shown in conducting a warlike operation; he had, indeed, acquired a taste for the business, and the campaign opened well. The sleeve-button found by Madame Majoré, Mariette's narrative, and M. Crozon's revelations, were so many advantages secured over the enemy. That enemy was the Marchioness de Barancos, whom he found pleasure in fighting as she knew how to defend herself; indeed, Nointel made a pastime of struggling by dint of artifice and address against this bewitching adversary, of reducing her by his skilful manœuvres, and finally vanquishing her. His batteries were ready, and he only asked to open fire. Still, as he could dispose of a few hours before beginning the engagement, he determined to employ them in accordance with his fancy.

Between breakfast and dinner he was in the habit of smoking a few cigars in the billiard-room at his club. He not only liked to play there, but he was well pleased to see others play, for his observing mind found exercise in studying the curious and varied individuals who, between four and six o'clock, engaged in bouts at billiards. He considered that having devoted a good third of his day to the cause of innocence and friendship, he had gained the right to enjoy his favourite recreation. The marchioness did not receive till five o'clock, and he had no need to return home to dress,

his valet having orders to bring him a suitable visiting costume at the club. He did not expect to see Crozon, the whaleman, again that day, for, to his idea, the anonymous correspondent who had troubled the poor sailor's repose during the last three months, seemed scarcely sure of what he stated, and Nointel scarcely believed that this correspondent would name Madame Crozon's lover. "Besides," he said to himself, as he climbed the stairs of the club-house, "that lover was Golymine, according to all appearance, and Golymine is dead. But the deuce take me if I know who the informer can be. Probably some enemy of the Pole, a fellow who was in some way interested in having him killed by Crozon."

Having said this, Nointel thought no more about it. This was his usual method when he had any cares, which did not often happen. He left them at the door of the red-room, exactly as he had formerly taken off his sword on entering the mess-room, and so when he crossed the threshold of the billiard-hall at the club his mind was as free and as gay as when he first wore a sub-lieutenant's epaulettes.

The billiard tournament was already in full swing, although it was still quite early. Winter, however, was at its pranks; the Bois de Boulogne was no longer enjoyable, and the most determined lovers of out-door sports had been compelled to fall back on diversions under shelter. Nointel thus found himself in the midst of men whom he knew and whom he liked to meet, less for the enjoyment of their conversation than for the pleasure of laughing at them whenever the opportunity was afforded. Among those present he noticed Verpel, a young financier, who was well spoken of both at the Bourse and in fast society; Lieutenant Tréville, a hussar, persecuted by the Queen of Spades, but favoured by the "ladies of the lake;" M. Perdrigeon, a serious man, who was fond of the fair sex, and who, after dealing in oil, employed his mature years in protecting *débutantes* and acting as a silent partner in the management of petty theatres; the youthful Baron de Sigolène, an aspiring sportsman and lover of cards, who had lately arrived from the province of Velay; Alfred Lenvers, a clever young man who made an income of thirty thousand francs by plucking pigeons at *piquet* and *bézique*; M. Coulibœuf, a landed owner in the Gâtinais; Major Cocktail, an Englishman by birth, a Parisian by inclination, and better by profession; Charmol, called the amiable, formerly an attorney, and now a member of the well-known society of versifiers called the Caveau; and Colonel Tartaras, who boasted of thirty years of service, twenty campaigns, six wounds, and an abominable disposition.

Simancas and Saint-Galxier were wanting to make up the party; but Nointel perceived that Prébord and Lolif were at the billiard-table. The game was an exciting one, for bettors abounded, and the two players were considered to be pretty well matched. For the moment Lolif had the advantage, and he had just executed a most difficult stroke amid the plaudits of the gallery. He coolly smiled, and he was preparing to profit by a run which he had prepared for himself by this triumphant play, when he suddenly espied Nointel.

"Good morning, captain," he called out to him, as soon as he perceived him. "Were you at Julia's funeral? I was told that you were seen there. I was there too, but, unfortunately, I was not able to go to the cemetery. I was called before the examining magistrate at one o'clock. There is some news, my dear fellow. Just fancy that—"

"Oh, come now! are you going to recite the Code of Criminal Procedure to us?" exclaimed Lieutenant Tréville, "I have had enough of

your stories about your evidence and your discoveries. In the first place, there is nothing that brings bad luck like talking of lawsuits. When I happen by chance to read the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, I have no luck for the next twenty-four hours, and I have bet ten louis on you, my big fellow."

"The lieutenant is right," grumbled Colonel Tartaras, who added:

"To the game! dash it all! to the game! I'm in for forty francs, young man."

"They are won, colonel," said Lolif, brandishing his cue with the air of a conqueror. "I have only nine points to make. You shall see how I will make them for you."

"I bet twenty louis against fifteen on Monsieur Lolif," said the Baron de Sigolène.

"I take that," retorted Vernel, the future banker. And Lolif, proud of the confidence with which he had inspired the gentleman from Velay, set himself to justify it by canoning at his best.

Nointel was delighted, the interruptions from the gallery had relieved him from the necessity of replying to Lolif's indiscreet questions, for he did not at all care to inform the idlers of the club that he had honoured Madame d'Orceval's obsequies with his presence. He walked through the billiard-room without saluting Prébord—who, since the evening before, in the Champs-Élysées, had assumed a decided hostile attitude—and took a seat at one of the leather-covered benches against the walls.

Lolif, excited perhaps by his presence, had just made a false stroke, and his adversary was about to profit by his awkwardness. The captain had no sooner taken his seat among the spectators of the tournament than a footman came to him carrying a letter on a silver tray. Nointel looked at the address; it was in a writing unknown to him, and he carelessly unsealed the missive which he presumed would interest him but little. A change came over his face however, on reading the signature of General Simancas.

"Oh! oh!" he said to himself, "what can this Peravian have to say to me? Let us see."

"Dear Sir,—The Marchioness de Barancos directs me to inform you that she will not receive to-day, Tuesday. She is quite indisposed from a nervous disorder which attacked her suddenly yesterday evening. My friend, Saint-Galmier, thinks that this crisis may prolong itself for several days. I had the honour of dining with him yesterday at his noble client's, and it is to this circumstance that I owe the pleasure of writing to you. The marchioness remembers that, at the opera, on Sunday, you promised her a visit; she is anxious to spare you an annoyance, and has begged me to express to you the regret she feels at being compelled to temporarily close her doors to those whom it would be most agreeable for her to receive. Believe, dear sir, in the best wishes of your entirely devoted servant."

"And it is this rogue whom she selects to write to me?" thought the captain. "That is a bad sign, worse than all the others. Madame de Barancos employing Simancas as a secretary, and putting herself under the care of Saint-Galmier, nothing could be more significant. The two scoundrels who have such a hold on her must have witnessed the murder. And if some one would rid her of them, it is my opinion that her gratitude would be unbounded. It is necessary now to decide which would be best for Mademoiselle Lestérel's interests—to take the part of the marchioness

with a view to releasing her from these fellows, and afterwards force an avowal from her, or to compel the two black slaves to denounce her. This last plan is evidently the most practicable; but to make these rascals act I must give them a motive—I must possess proof of one of the evil deeds they have on their consciences. Until I surprise one of their secrets, I don't give up the idea of pushing my point with Madame de Barancos; we will soon see if she will persist in closing her door to me, as Don José Simancas says; he shall answer to me for this impertinence one day or other."

This monologue was interrupted by some loud exclamations about a doubtful stroke. Lolif claimed that his ball had touched the red; his adversary contested the fact, and the bettors also were divided in opinion. The majority, finally decided in Prébord's favour; and Lolif, who had only three points to make to win, was obliged to give up the play to his enemy, who had made twenty-four out of the thirty points which were the limit of the game.

"I am done for, captain," said Lieutenant Tréville as he took a seat at Nointel's side. "That fool of a Lolif is going to lose the ten louis I bet on him, and if you had arrived five minutes later, he would have won easily. But as soon as he sees any one with whom he can talk about the d'Orcival affair, he no longer knows what he is doing."

"I am sure I don't know why he should take a notion to address me about that affair," replied Nointel, shrugging his shoulders. "I am not at all informed as to what takes place concerning commissaries of police and examining magistrates."

"That is so; but you are Darcy's intimate friend, and Darcy was Julia's lover. Lolif imagines that anything connected with the crime at the opera house interests you, and it needed only that to make him miss an easy shot. Just look at that Prébord. You will see the petty game he will play. He will beat about the bush until he finds he has a good run in a corner. See! he has it. The three balls are in a corner. Twenty-five! twenty-six! twenty-seven! twenty— No, he made a mull. Come, I have still some hope—providing Lolif's attention is not diverted by something fresh."

"Why don't you play yourself, instead of betting?"

"Because I allow myself to be beaten by trifles. I am too nervous, and those people there make me lose my patience. They are all more tiresome than each other. There is, in the first place, the tribe of petty players, with Prébord at their head; Verpel, who plays a game as though he was bound to win; Lenvers, who puts the chalk in his pocket to prevent his adversary from using it. Then the muffs; Coulibœuf, who declares that the lamps give no light; and that old leather-breeches of a Tartaras, who complains that people smoke while he plays."

"You have Sir John Cocktail."

"That major is too cunning for me. Besides, he only plays with Sigolène, who doesn't know how to hold his cue; or with Perdrigeon, when the latter has dined too well with some actresses."

"And Charmol?"

"Charmol! He bores my ears with songs, which he practises for the purpose of charming the members of the Caveau—and in view of preventing me from canoning. To say nothing of his astonishing me with his gymnastics. He always has one foot in the air. He plays all the time with his hands behind his back, and he will finish by playing with his

nose. But, look! Lolif has just made two points. We are now at twenty-nine. One more, and my money is doubled. I must take a closer view of that," concluded the lieutenant, as he sprang from the bench on which he had been perched.

Nointel let him go without regret, although he enjoyed his picturesque language. The captain, who had come to divert and rest his mind, found himself impelled, in spite of himself, to serious reflections by this letter from Simancas. He had put the missive in his pocket, but could not prevent himself from thinking of it and drawing conclusions therefrom.

"Now then, my boy," shouted Tréville to Lolif, "set your mind on the billiards, and see that you have a sure eye and a cool head. The shot is simple and easy. Take the ball on the top and a little to the left—not too hard—softly."

"Tell me, Lolif," said Prébord all at once, "is it true, what I have been told—that the minx who killed the d'Orceval is to be set at liberty?"

This question had been asked by Prébord just at the moment when his adversary was making the long shot, which was to assure him the game. And this question went so directly to his heart that his ball missed the red. His passion for reporting made his arm deviate, and he shamefully missed one of the most simple strokes. This clumsy failure provoked loud exclamations from the gallery, but Prébord let the bettors shout, and completed his thirty points with three strokes of the cue.

"Confound it!" said the colonel, looking furiously at the unfortunate Lolif; "you did it expressly, then? You should have warned me that you were as nervous as a woman. I shouldn't have lost my forty francs."

"Lolif played like a cabman," shouted Tréville, "but Prébord ought not to have spoken to him. Such things are not done."

"Again, if he had only spoken to me," murmured the vanquished player pitifully; "but to address me such a question as that. I know the Lestérel affair in its minutest details, and I know perfectly well that the suspected woman has not been released—"

"No, such things are not allowable," continued the lieutenant. "And by good right, the game ought to be annulled."

"I am opposed to that," said Verpel, who had bet on Prébord. "It is not written in the rules of billiards that one must play in dumb style. Sigolène, my good fellow, you owe me twenty louis."

"The rules are not in question here. The matter to be decided is whether it is permissible to interfere with a player just as he makes a shot. To question him, point-blank, on a subject which interests him is exactly the same as to jostle him. I leave it to Captain Nointel."

"I, too," added Tartaras. "What do you think of the case?"

"My faith! colonel, I think that the rules not having foreseen such an occurrence, Monsieur Prébord has the right to claim that he has won. The question of fairness still remains, and that can be variously regarded."

"What do you mean by those words?" asked Prébord, turning very pale.

"Whatever you please," replied Nointel, looking at him fixedly.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" exclaimed Lolif, who was a born conciliator, "lay the blame on me, I beg of you—Prébord had no bad intention—and I should be grieved to be the cause of a quarrel—I would rather take all the bets I have caused to be lost to my own account."

"Don't worry yourself, my dear fellow, the affair will stop there," said the captain with a disdainful smile.

Indeed, the dandy did not seem to wish to push matters further. He had joined a little group of friends who took his part, but who only wished that the affair be buried. It did not enter into Nointel's plans to follow up this commencement of a quarrel. The time had not yet arrived for him to settle accounts with Prébord; it sufficed for him to have publicly shown in what estimation he held this coxcomb, and he added not a word to the lesson he had just given him.

Besides, Lolif did not give him time to change his resolution. Without asking for the revenge which his adversary did not offer him, he seized hold of Nointel and finished by dragging him into a little smoking-room which communicated with the billiard-hall; and Nointel allowed him to do so, although it cost him an effort to relinquish the repose he had promised himself for a few hours. He plainly foresaw that Lolif only led him away to talk to him about the crime at the opera house, and he expected to receive a mass of insignificant news; but he resigned himself, out of friendship for Darcy, to submit once more to this petty gossip. Pearls are sometimes found in oysters, and valuable suggestions in the sayings of a fool.

"My dear fellow," said the would-be reporter, "I should like to know where Prébord can have heard that Mademoiselle Lestérel has been set at liberty."

"Nowhere, my dear friend," replied the captain. "That question was only intended to trouble you and to make you miss your stroke."

"That is quite possible—Prébord has a way of playing which doesn't suit me; but that isn't the question. I know that you interest yourself in the great trial which is in preparation, and which will stir all Paris."

"I! oh, very little, I assure you. I hardly read the newspapers."

"You cannot be indifferent to it, if only on account of your friend Darcy, who must ardently desire that Madame d'Orcival's murder should not remain unpunished. Very well; although he is the nephew of the examining magistrate, I am certain that he is not as well informed as myself."

"I believe it. His uncle has peremptorily refused to say a single word to him of what passes in his office."

"And his uncle is right. Monsieur Roger Darcy is a magistrate of the old stock. He knows his duties, and nothing will make him neglect them. But as to me, I am not bound by an oath like he is. I was scrupulously silent until he received my testimony; now that I have deposed, I am free to gather information and to tell my friends what I have learned."

"Absolutely free."

"Very well, my dear Nointel, I have not lost my time, for the investigation has no secrets for me. I have put myself in relation with some one whom I will not name, because I have promised him an inviolable discretion—"

"In exchange for his indiscretions."

"Why, yes. You understand that if it was known that he gave me information he would lose his place. I don't wish to injure the father of a family, and besides he would tell me nothing more, and I should have spent my money uselessly. You may very well believe that the information I receive from this clerk is not gratuitous, and it has already cost me a considerable amount."

"It remains to be seen if it is worth as much as it has cost you."

"You shall be the judge. This is what has taken place since Sunday, day by day. Yesterday, Monday, in the morning, the search of Mademoiselle Lestérel's residence. A fragment of a letter was found there in which Madame d'Orcival appointed a rendezvous with her at the ball at the opera house."

"At what time?" asked Nointel, who had not seen Darcy since the night before.

"My man did not tell me, and I did not think to ask him. The time, however, matters little. It suffices that it is proved that the person under suspicion went to the ball."

"That is so," said the captain, who thought just the contrary, but who saw that, on this point, there was nothing to be drawn from Lolif.

"Now, it is proved that she went there. Yesterday afternoon she was questioned, and she persevered in her course, which consists in refusing to answer."

"Not a bad course that. Silence is golden, says the proverb."

"The proverb is wrong in this case. Remember that, in presence of accumulated facts, silence is equal to an avowal."

"Oh, come now! It is always time enough to talk, and by not replying, one does not risk ruining one's self. If I was accused, I would not say a word in the magistrate's chamber. I would not open my mouth until I was in the presence of the jury."

"Mademoiselle Lestérel is of your opinion, for up to the present Monsieur Darcy has obtained nothing, neither confession nor explanation from her; still the facts speak. She might have contended that she did not go to the rendezvous given by Julia d'Orcival. Unfortunately for her, a very intelligent commissary took the notion to search the register of lost articles deposited at the Préfecture. He saw by that register that a domino and a mask had been found on the public highway on the night between Saturday and Sunday. Monsieur Roger Darcy was immediately notified; he gave some orders, and they were executed with marvellous celerity. That same evening the costumier was found who sold the articles—sold, not loaned; note that. She recognised them at once. The domino was not new, and there was a darn in the hood. This morning, at nine o'clock, the costumier was confronted with the party under suspicion, whom she also recognised in the most formal way."

"And the suspected party denied it?"

"No. She merely cried. She could not deny it. The costumier reminded her of all the circumstances attending the purchase which was made on Saturday night. There is not a shadow of a doubt now as to the presence of Mademoiselle Lestérel at the ball at the opera house."

"It is certain that she did not buy a domino and a mask to go and give a lesson in singing."

"And if she bought them instead of hiring them, it was because she did not intend to return them, but to rid herself of them."

"How to rid herself of them?"

"By throwing them out of the window of the vehicle which carried her away from the ball. The cab has not yet been found, but it is being searched for."

"Where were these cast-off clothes found?"

"Ah, there it is! Two police officers, who were making their rounds for the night, found them on the Boulevard de la Villette, at the corner of the Rue du Buisson-Saint-Louis. It's strange, is it not?"

"Say that it is inexplicable. If this young lady killed Julia, one would think she would want to hurry home after doing so. What the deuce was she doing out near Belleville?"

"It was a ruse to throw the authorities off the track."

"She foresaw, then, that she would be arrested as early as the next day. It would have been much more simple to have quietly regained her lodgings, have taken off her domino in the cab, if she feared to be seen wearing it, and have gone the next evening and thrown the said domino somewhere—into the Seine, for instance, or on to some waste ground, or even in the street."

"My dear fellow, criminals don't reason in such a complicated manner. She was in a hurry to rid herself of a compromising costume; she did not wish to throw it away in her neighbourhood——"

"And so she went and threw it away at the other end of Paris. What you say isn't at all natural; and if I was in Monsieur Roger Darcy's place I should open an investigation as to the connections Mademoiselle Lestérel could have had in the vicinity of La Villette or the Buttes-Chaumont."

"That is what he will do, no doubt. But admit that I have told you some news. Darcy will be greatly pleased when you tell him that conviction is already certain."

"Idiot!" thought Nointel, as he looked at Lolif, who assumed an air of importance. And he asked him in a careless way: "Do you know what time it was when the police officers picked up these things?"

"My faith! no; I didn't think to ask that. But the magistrate ought to know it. He omits nothing, I assure you. The most insignificant details are collected by him with great care."

"Very well, try and inform yourself on that point, and do me the kindness to tell me what you find out."

"Ah, ah, you are beginning to have a taste for the profession which fascinates me, so I can see. Bravo! my dear fellow. Practice it a little, and you will acknowledge that nothing is more amusing."

"That depends on tastes," said the captain, feigning to suppress a yawn. "As for me, I don't like problems. It was all very well when I was preparing for Saint-Cyr. I listen to you willingly when you talk of such things, because you talk about them ably; but at the end of a quarter of an hour I have had enough. Let us return to the billiard-room, my dear fellow. I feel the need of stretching myself on one of the seats, and of sleeping to the sweet sound of the billiard balls."

Lolif sighed, for he had hoped for a moment that Nointel was going to share his hobby; however, the compliment lightened the effect of the refusal to labour together. Nointel, on re-entering the room, said to himself: "That booby doesn't suspect that he has just indicated to me the most interesting point to verify. If it was earlier than three o'clock when the police officers found the domino, Mademoiselle Lestérel would be saved, since it is proved that the domino belongs to her, and that Julia was killed at three o'clock. I will inform myself on the point if Lolif does not inform me."

And he prepared himself, in the meanwhile, to enjoy the repose he had well earned. The marchioness did not receive visitors that day, at least according to Simancas, and the captain, while deciding to verify that information, very shortly, congratulated himself on being able to pass the evening to suit himself. He contemplated a dinner at the club, and after

that going where fancy led him, unless Darcy turned up and required his service in some duty connected with the great affair.

The game had re-commenced. The young Baron de Sigolène, bold but unlucky, was playing a game of sixteen against Major Cocktail, who regularly allowed him to score twelve points, and then made a victorious run of sixteen canons. Tréville, from patriotism, persisted in betting on the gentleman from Velay and lost to Alfred Lenvers, who, having no national prejudices, backed the Englishman, while waiting till some "pigeon" presented himself to be plucked at piquet. Colonel Tartaras nursed his wrath in a corner. He had not yet digested Lolif's bad play. Coulibœuf was telling Perdrigeon that one day, at the Cercle d'Orléans, he had made a run of seventy-nine canons, and Perdrigeon, who did not listen to him, asked him for news of one Déjazet, an actress, who was then performing, temporarily, in the provinces. Prébord and Verpel had disappeared. The sweet Charmol, the singer of the Caveau, had followed them.

Lolif, still quite ashamed of his recent mistake, timidly slipped behind the players, and Nointel, after selecting a place appropriate for reverie, established himself in a convenient position and lighted an excellent cigar. He had not drawn three whiffs from it, however, when the unforeseen presented itself in the shape of a servant of the club, bearing on a tray—not a letter this time, but a visiting card.

The captain took it and read on it the name of Crozon.

"Already!" he thought. "So the anonymous informer has written to him about his wife's lover. This is something worth while disturbing one's self for."

"The person is there?" he asked of the valet.

"He awaits monsieur in the parlour—that is to say, there are two persons," replied the servant.

"How, two? You have brought me but one card."

"That gentleman is accompanied by a—a man."

"That will do; say that I am coming," continued the captain, somewhat surprised. And he rather regretfully left the bench where he had felt so comfortable.

"Who the deuce has this whaleman brought me?" thought he, as he crossed the billiard-room. "A man, in the language of lackeys, that means an individual who is badly dressed. Can it be that Crozon, having discovered that his wife betrayed him with a scoundrel, has taken the odd notion to bring the aforesaid scoundrel here with the sole view of punishing him in my presence? With that madman one may expect anything. Still, he might have chosen his time better. I was delighting myself in thinking of nothing. It is evidently decreed that I am not to be left in peace to-day."

The visitors' parlour was situated at the other end of the apartments belonging to the club, and, on passing through the red-room, Nointel perceived Prébord in conference with Verpel and Charmol. "Has he, by chance, any intention of sending me his seconds?" said Nointel, to himself. "Pou my word! I should not be sorry. A duel would inconvenience me a little at the present moment, but I should have so much pleasure in giving that coxcomb a sword-thrust that I shouldn't refuse the chance." He affected to walk slowly and to turn round several times, to let the trio understand that an encounter could easily be arranged; but Prébord and his two friends pretended not to see him, and he was wise

enough not to provoke them. He held such adversaries in contempt, and besides, he was anxious to know what news M. Crozon brought.

He found Berthe's brother-in-law planted upright in the middle of the parlour, his hat on his head, his face inflamed, his eyes gloomy, and his features contracted—having, indeed, the air and attitude of a man who is transported with rage, but who by force controls himself. Behind this unhappy husband stood a tall fellow, lank and bony like a Yankee, wearing a brush-like beard and moustache, and seemingly much embarrassed with his person. This strange personage was dressed in an olive-green overcoat, heavy blue cloth pantaloons, and a yellow goat-skin waistcoat. "What kind of a bird is that?" the captain asked himself. "He resembles an Arkansas trapper, and is dressed like Nonaucourt in the 'Chapeau de paille d'Italie.'"

"Monsieur Bernache, chief engineer on board the polar ship 'Etoile,' which I command," said the whalerman in a hoarse voice and with an automatic gesture.

On any other occasion Nointel would have laughed heartily at this way of presenting some one, at the same time slapping him across the breast with the back of his hand, but he felt that the situation was a serious one, and he replied with perfect nonchalance:

"I am delighted to make the acquaintance of Monsieur Bernache. Will you explain to me, my dear Crozon, what I can do to serve him—and you."

"You don't guess?" asked the sailor, with a piercing look.

"No, on my word."

"Monsieur is my second."

"Ah, I understand. You have received the letter you expected. You now know with whom you have to deal, you are going to fight, and you have chosen as your second a tried comrade who has sailed with you. I can but congratulate you on your choice, and I am not at all displeased that you should prefer this gentleman whom you know so much better than you do me, and who will represent you much more efficiently."

Nointel thought he was very smart in talking thus. He feared that Crozon entertained the idea of joining him to this engineer as an accompanying second, and he wished to evade the ridiculous duty with which he thought himself threatened. He was not prepared to be challenged, as he was at once.

"Don't pretend not to understand me," shouted the whalerman. "It is with you that I wish to fight, and I have brought Bernache so that we may get it over at once. You must have some friends here. Send for one and let us start. We will go wherever you wish. In a cab below I have some small swords, pistols, and broadswords."

The captain was taken aback, but he began to see through it, and was not disconcerted. "Why do you wish to fight with me?" he asked quietly.

Crozon started, and said between his teeth: "You are jesting. It will cost you dear."

"I am not jesting. I was never more serious, and I beg of you to reply to the question I have just addressed to you."

"You compel me to do so; you insist on hearing me proclaim what you know full well. So be it; it is an additional insult; but I will settle all my accounts at the same time, for I wish to kill you, do you understand?"

"Perfectly ; but why ?"

"Because you have been my wife's lover?"

Nointel received this extravagant declaration with the same coolness with which he had formerly received shells from Krupp guns. Another man would have cried out and have tried to justify himself. But Nointel dealt with the matter in a different way, and he did right. "If I was to affirm to you that it is not true, you wouldn't believe me, I suppose," he said, without emotion.

"No ; and I advise you to save yourself the trouble of lying. How would you have me believe you ? You told me yourself, not two hours ago, that in such cases a man of honour always denied."

"I said it, and I repeat it. But you will also admit that a man of honour may have been falsely accused."

"No. No one has any interest in pointing you out as having been my wife's lover."

"How do you know that ? I have several enemies ; and I know of one, among others, who is very capable of having thought of this means of ridding himself of me without exposing his person. Take notice, I beg of you, that I do not protest ; that I do not dispute it ; and even that I do not refuse to give you satisfaction."

"That is all I want. Let us go."

"Presently. Hear me first ; I shall not be long. You have received, as I should judge, another letter from the rogue who, during the past three months, has not ceased denouncing your wife, and this time it has pleased the rogue to point me out for your vengeance. I have the right to ask if that letter is signed, and if it is, I can require you to accompany me to the author so that I may be able to compel him to admit, in your presence, that he has basely calumniated me. I will compel him to do so, I answer for that, and I will make him swallow his letter if he refuses the duel to the death which I shall propose to him."

"The letter is not signed."

"Very well. Then I can only lay the fault on you, who give credence to an anonymous accusation brought against me by a base villain. And if you, yourself, did not seek a duel with me, I should demand satisfaction from you, since you insult me by supposing that I have deceived you—you who were my comrade, and almost my friend."

"Such treachery as that is of frequent occurrence in the society in which you live."

"That may be ; but what would not be tolerated in any society is, that I should have made you narrate your domestic troubles, as I did to-day, if I had caused them. To believe me guilty of so base an action, is to insult me, I repeat to you, and I don't tolerate insults. So we will fight."

"Good ! Find a second quickly, and let us be off."

"Excuse me ; I have not finished. I insist on telling you, before I follow you to the field, what I intend to do after the encounter. You meet me with the objection that I shall do nothing, as I can see that you are sure of killing me. Very well, I affirm to you that you will not kill me. You are expert with all arms, but I am even more skilful than you."

"We will see about that," said the sea captain, impatiently.

"Yes, you will see. In fact, I shall wound you ; and when I have wounded you, to teach you not to suspect me of a villany, I shall take the trouble to prove to you that the accusation, which you accept so

readily, is absurd, and that not only was I never your wife's lover, but that I never even saw her in my whole lifetime. Now I have said all I wish to say, and I am ready to follow you wherever you may please to lead me. Allow me merely to go and find a particular friend whom I wish to have for a second, for it is useless to divulge this affair, and I can rely on his discretion."

The whaleman seemed to hesitate a little. The captain's peroration had made some impression on him; but he was not the man to withdraw after having advanced so far, and he made a sign to Bernache to follow him. The chief engineer did not care for appearances, and was not a ready talker, but he was not lacking in common-sense, and he now risked a very wise observation.

"In your place, my old friend Crozon," he said timidly, "before coming to blows with this gentleman, who is no more afraid than you are, I should ask him to do before the scrimmage, what he proposes doing after it."

"What are you singing to me there?" growled the old sea-dog.

"My song is easily understood. This gentleman declares that he has never seen or known your wife, and I would put my hand in the fire that he doesn't lie. But since you refuse to believe the word of an officer, why don't you beg of him to show you that he tells the truth?"

"I am curious to know how he would set about it," said Crozon, while shrugging his shoulders.

"Why, it seems very simple to me," replied the judicious engineer. "Your wife knows nothing of what is going on, isn't that so? You never spoke to her about this gentleman?"

"No, what then?"

"And she is at home, ill—not able to go out. Consequently, she cannot have followed you——"

"No, a hundred times no."

"Very well; it seems to me, that if we went to see her, all three of us, and if you told her that this gentleman was a comrade of yours, you would soon see by her face if——"

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted Nointel, "I don't know if your proposition will be accepted by Monsieur Crozon, but I absolutely refuse to submit myself to a test of that kind. I consider it beneath my dignity to play a comedy which, moreover, would not produce the result you hope for. Madame Crozon would certainly not display any emotion on seeing me, since I am absolutely unknown to her; but Monsieur Crozon might think that she hid her impressions. It is not by such means as that that I propose convincing him—when I have given him the lesson which he deserves."

The captain had manœuvred with rare ability, and had calculated in advance the effect of his words, which all tended to calm the furious husband, though they seemed to be uttered expressly to exasperate him the more. However, the captain understood jealous people, from having associated with them; and he said to himself that the more haughtily he received the accusation brought against him by this lunatic, the greater would be the chance of bringing him to reason. The worst that could happen was to be forced to go and fight, and the encounter did not frighten him, for he felt pretty certain of wounding Crozon, and, consequently, putting him out of condition to kill his wife. He even asked himself if it would not be better for the affair to end like that.

But while he talked, a change was taking place in the husband's thoughts. He began to reflect, and although it was hard for him to take a step backward, he was, nevertheless, struck with the calmness and firmness that Nointel displayed. Finally he exclaimed :

"You don't like Bernache's plan—you pretend that you have another which will prove to me that I accuse you falsely. Tell me your plan, then."

"What good would it do? You wouldn't agree to it."

"Tell it me at all events."

"No. I would rather fight."

"Because you know very well that you wouldn't convince me."

"I should convince you perfectly. But to do that, I should need time, and you don't seem disposed to wait. As for me, I don't care to wait either. Let us have done with it. Have you a vehicle below?"

"Time? How time? Explain yourself."

"You wish to know my idea, then? so be it; but admit that I am obliging. Well, if you were cool, I should ask you to show me the anonymous letter you have just received. You offered a short time ago to show me the others, the old ones. You might very well let me see that one."

"No doubt, and when you had seen it?"

"When I had seen it, one of two things would happen: either I should know the writing of your amiable correspondent, and, in that case, we would go together, without losing a minute, and force him to confess that he had lied; or, I should not recognise it at once, and then I should commence an investigation, and that investigation would end, I am sure of it, by the discovery of the guilty one. It is one of my familiar enemies who has done this, and I have but three or four. I should do my best to find the author of the letter among those three or four, but, of course, it would take too long. Let us talk no more about it."

Crozon still hesitated a little, and then abruptly pulled the letter from his pocket and held it out to Nointel, who, on glancing at it, experienced the most acute sensation he had felt since the death of Julia d'Orcival. It is not every handwriting that has an individual character apparent at the first glance. For example, the running-hand used in business is all alike; the English hand, learned by young girls at boarding-school, is the same; but that of the anonymous letter was very large, greatly spread out, and extremely regular—a writing of the good old times. Nointel had but to look at it to make sure that it was not unknown to him; only, he failed to remember where and when he had seen it.

"Well?" asked Crozon.

"Well," replied Nointel, without losing his coolness, "I cannot name the author of this letter to you immediately, but I am almost certain that I shall soon know who it comes from, especially if you allow me to read it."

"Read it—read it aloud. I have no secrets from Bernache."

The captain took the paper, held out to him by Crozon, and read it slowly, steadily, like a man who is trying to remember some past incident.

The letter ran as follows: "The friend who writes to you regrets that he is not yet prepared to inform you where to find the child that your wife was secretly confined of six weeks ago. This child was confided by her to a nurse, who changed her residence just as the person who is looking for her, to render you a service, was on the point of discovering her. The mother had, no doubt, got wind of the search, and so arranged matters to prevent its success. The nurse was warned, and has known

how to steal away ; but it is known for certain that she has not left Paris, and she will ultimately be found."

"Admit," said Nointel, "admit that your correspondent is a black villain, if he tells the truth. To denounce a guilty woman is cowardly, ignoble ; but he might pretend that duty obliges him to enlighten a deceived friend ; however, nothing obliges him to deliver up the child to you. If he knows your character, he must expect that you will kill it—that poor little being who is certainly quite innocent. He is, therefore, anxious to compel you to commit a crime."

"Spare me your reflections," interrupted the whaleman, more moved than he wished to appear.

"If this is the object this man has in view," continued the captain, "he deserves to be transported, and I would willingly charge myself with facilitating his voyage to Noumea. But I believe that he is boasting, I think he lies. He hasn't found the child, because the child doesn't exist. He has invented this story solely to get you into a condition of irritation, of which he expects to take advantage. What are his projects? I don't know ; but I suspect he wishes to employ you to rid him of somebody who is in his way."

"Read ! but read then !"

"This is where I was : 'While waiting till he can show you the living proof of your wife's treachery, your friend to-day fulfils the promise that he made you to designate her lover, or rather lovers, for there have been two.'"

"If he keeps on he will finish by discovering a dozen," said Nointel sarcastically ; and as he saw that this comment was not to Crozon's liking, he continued : "'The first, the one who turned her aside from her duty, and who was the father of her child, was a Polish adventurer named Wenceslas Golymine. This man pretended to be a noble, and attributed to himself the title of count. He lived in the best society, and spent a deal of money, but he was never anything but a swindler.'"

At this passage the captain stopped short, not because the statement astonished him—he had always thought that the letters returned by Julia to Mademoiselle Lestérel came from Golymine—but because his memory, aided by this statement, had suddenly returned to him. He remembered that the handwriting of this missive—that beautiful writing of the eighteenth century—was precisely like that of a note he had received a quarter of an hour before, a note in which Don José Simancas had informed him that the Marchioness de Barancos did not receive that day. Nointel had that note in his pocket, and any one else would not have failed to exhibit it, and show the husband the similarity of handwriting which left no doubt as to the personality of the anonymous informer ; but Nointel, on this occasion, showed extraordinary coolness and presence of mind. He had needed but an instant to realise all the consequences of an immediate declaration : Crozon launching himself at once in pursuit of the Peruvian, challenging him to furnish his proofs ; in a word, upsetting all the captain's combinations in detriment to the success of the investigation which had been so well commenced. He needed but an instant to tell himself that it was a hundred times better to keep the secret of this discovery, which furnished him with a means of action against Simancas, and only hand that scoundrel over to Crozon's strong arm, when the right moment had arrived to finish with him. And so Nointel had the strength of mind to keep his secret, to smile, and to exclaim : "Of course ! the rogue who

writes to you has excellent reasons for denouncing Count Goly mine. The latter can't contradict him, since he committed suicide last week."

"Yes, on the evening of the day before I arrived in Paris," said the whaleman, "and the next day my wife had a nervous attack on learning of his death. Continue, I beg of you."

Said Nointel to himself: "I think I shall have some trouble in persuading him that Madame Crozon is immaculate, but that isn't what I am after." And he again resumed his perusal: "'The self-styled Count Goly mine was obliged, some months ago, to leave France, to escape from his creditors, and his relations with your wife ceased at that time. They were not renewed on his return to Paris, where he has just come to an end like all scamps of his sort, by voluntarily killing himself.'

"All scamps of his sort," thought Nointel; "the sentence is a masterpiece written as it is by that sharper from across the ocean."

"Read on to the end," thundered the sailor.

"Very willingly," replied the captain, softly. "'They were not renewed because your wife had taken another lover.'—Good! I commence to understand.—'This lover was as careful to conceal his intrigue as the Pole had been to publish his.'—That is well thought of!—'The friend who writes to you!—' He holds to his formula,—'The friend who writes to you had great trouble in discovering these goings-on.'—I readily believe it.—'Nevertheless, he succeeded, and now he is sure of the fact.'—Ah! I am curious to know how he went to work to acquire this certainty; but he does not explain himself on the point, still to resume: 'He hastens then to tell you that the man who has dishonoured you is an ex-cavalry officer, who left the service to lead a scandalous life. He makes a profession of seducing married women, and takes pleasure in causing trouble in households.'—That's a life-like portrait," exclaimed Nointel, again pausing in his perusal. "If I am in question, as I suspect, I declare that your anonymous friend is simply an unbecile. But let us see the end: 'This Lovelace' is named Henri Nointel. He resides at No. 125 Rue d'Anjou, and goes every afternoon to his club.' So this man is absolutely determined that you shall exterminate me without losing an instant. I am surprised that he did not also indicate a way of assassinating me without running any risk. But, no—he confines himself to this fine appreciation: 'This Nointel is universally hated and despised. Whoever rids Parisian society of this man will have the approbation of all honest people. No judges could be found to condemn him.' Ho! ho! that conclusion very much resembles an incitement to murder. Is that all? There is a postscript: 'The investigation is being pursued. As soon as the nurse's new residence is known, your friend will notify you. His task will then be accomplished, and he will make himself known.' Good, this time it's complete, and I'm duly warned. Here is the letter, my dear fellow," said the captain, presenting the accusing document to Crozon.

"Try, at least, to justify yourself," exclaimed the latter.

"I sha'n't attempt to do so. If you are blinded by jealousy to such a point that you seriously entertain such absurdities, you who know my character, having lived with me intimately at an age when a man doesn't dissimulate anything, if you lend faith to such stupid calumnies, all that I could say to you would be to no purpose. I prefer to repeat to you that I am subject to your orders. Let us fight, since you wish it. I hope that you won't kill me. I even hope that later on you will recover from your

prejudices, and that you will then think of chastising the wretch who, on the pretext of rendering you a service, insults you in each line of that odious note. 'Your wife has had a lover,' that's all he knows how to say. And I swear to you, if I were married and a man wrote to me in that style, I should have no rest till I had run him through."

"Name him, then," said the whaleman, somewhat shaken by this simple speech.

"I will name him to you, rest easy; I will name him to you before he, on his side, has indicated the locality where that pretended child, which has never been born, is hidden."

"Why don't you name him now, if you have recognised his writing?"

"I have not recognised it," said Nointel, boldly; "but I am detested by people who have never written to me. I know them exceedingly well, those people. I suspect two or three, and I shall find a way of procuring a few lines of their writing. I shall not even need to compare them; the writing which you have just shown me is impressed on my memory. Only, I warn you that I shall not leave you the satisfaction of treating that cur as he deserves. I reserve myself the pleasure of cuffing him, in the first place, and of spitting him afterwards, if it be possible to bring him to the duelling-ground. But I am amusing myself with making projects, and we lose precious time. The days are very short in the month of February; and if we prolong our chat, we shall be obliged to delay our affair till to-morrow."

"It is too late already. One couldn't see to cut one's throat," the chief engineer hastened to say. "Besides, I am of opinion that there is no such hurry about it."

"What?" growled Crozon. "you too, Bernache! you set yourself against me?"

"I don't set myself against you, but I find that this gentleman says some very sensible things. In the first place, a man who denounces any one without signing his name is necessarily a rascal. And it's plain enough to see what he wants, the dog. He has a spite against Monsieur Nointel, and he counts on your killing him. He must have heard that you are a rager, and that you handle all arms well. And he is anxious for you to settle the affair, for he is careful to tell you where you will find this gentleman—the place, the hour, and all."

"Oh, he knows my habits," said the captain, laughing. "He knew that I should be here between four and five. But he didn't know that I had given Crozon an appointment here, for he doesn't suspect that we are old comrades. His combination is at fault in that respect. And it is quite natural. The rascal couldn't divine that thirteen years ago I embarked with Crozon on the 'Jérémie.' It was because he wasn't aware of that particular that he risked laying this trap for both of us."

Nointel spoke with so easy an air, his tone was so frank, his language so plain, that the intractable whaleman, in spite of himself, took the road to sensible reflections. He looked alternately at the captain and at his friend Bernache, and it was easily divined what was taking place in his head. After a somewhat long pause, he said, abruptly:

"Nointel, will you give me your word of honour that you have never seen my wife?"

Nointel remained as cool as a sea of ice, and, weighing his words, replied: "My dear Crozon, if you had commenced by asking for my word I would have given it willingly. But we have passed that point. For

half-an-hour you have been accusing me of very villanous things and doubting my sincerity. I have endured from you what I would not have put up with from any one else. So you can hardly be surprised if I don't obey a summons to swear. You might not believe in my word of honour, and in that case you would seriously offend me. I prefer not to expose myself to such a misfortune. Remember, too, that you regretted having put faith in an oath made under similar circumstances—

"By my sister-in-law! That isn't the same thing at all. Women are not scrupulous about swearing falsely. But you, Nointel, I take you for a man of honour, and if you would——"

"Yes, but I won't."

"Very well," exclaimed the sailor, now convinced by so much firmness, "merely affirm to me that it isn't true; that you are not——"

"Madame Crozon's lover. But, my dear fellow, I have been doing nothing else ever since I came into this room," said Nointel, bursting into laughter.

This time the whaleman was vanquished. The blood rushed to his face, the tears came to his eyes, his lips trembled, and he finished by extending his big hand to Nointel, who pressed it, and by saying in a choking voice: "I suspected you. I was mad. You mustn't be angry with me. I am so wretched."

"At last!" exclaimed the captain, "I again find you such as you formerly were. I be angry with you, my dear Crozon! Oh! dear no. I pity you too much to have any rancour against you. And I have already forgotten all that has just taken place here. There is but one thing that I remember—the writing of that scoundrel who almost brought me face to face with an old comrade with a sword or a pistol in hand, and I tell you that he shall pay dearly for his villany."

"Do you wish his letter to assist you in finding him?"

Nointel was dying with the desire to say yes. That letter would have become a terrible weapon in his hands against Simancas; but he controlled himself, for he felt the necessity of not going too fast with this stormy husband, and so he replied quickly: "Thanks for no longer mistrusting me; but keep the letter. I will ask you for it when I have found my rogue; or rather, I shall beg you to be present at the explanation I shall have with him, and place it under his nose as a proof of his infamy. Permit me, now, to thank Monsieur Bernache also. It is partly to his intervention that I am indebted for not having my throat cut by an old friend. I beg him to believe that I am henceforth under obligations to him, and that he can count on me under all circumstances."

The engineer stammered a few polite words, but Nointel did not need that he should explain himself more clearly. He plainly realised that the deepest sympathies of that worthy man were his for all time to come. And the conquest of M. Bernache was not to be disdained, for he exercised a certain amount of influence over Crozon, and the captain had not yet done with the whaleman. He was, on the contrary, anxious to see him often, in the interest of Berthe Lestérel and her unfortunate sister, who remained exposed, the one to the violence of her husband, the other to the insults of her brother-in-law. Crozon, temporarily calmed, might at any moment be taken with a new outburst of fury, brought about by a fresh denunciation. He might also launch into some imprudent course, and involuntary aggravate the charge which still rested on Berthe. Nointel was fully determined not to release his hold upon him, and he began with—

out further delay to *work* him—that was the word which came to his mind, and it very well expressed his intentions.

"My dear comrade," he continued, in the most affectionate tone, "since there no longer remains a cloud between us, I can now talk to you with open heart. It is my opinion that you have been the victim of an abominable machination. This rogue who has written to you has amused himself by poisoning your existence, and that of Madame Crozon."

"Why?" asked the whaleman, whose face became clouded; "I have no enemies—at least in Paris."

"That is to say, that you don't know of any. But a man often has secret enemies. However, this fellow has perhaps some motive of hatred against Madame Crozon. There are cowards in the world who revenge themselves on a woman because she has disdained their homage."

"If that had been the case, Mathilde would have named this wretch to me. Her justification would have been all prepared."

"You don't reflect that by naming him she would oblige you to fight with him. Even to defend herself against an unjust accusation an honest woman doesn't expose the life of the husband she loves."

"She loves!" repeated the sailor, shaking his head.

"But, come," continued Nointel, without paying attention to this expression of a doubt, which he shared, "it is not like that that I look at the situation. Your anonymous correspondent, in my opinion, has no grudge either against yourself or Madame Crozon, but against some others."

"Against whom, then?"

"Against me, in the first place. It is evident that I am in his way, and that not being able to suppress me himself, he thought of having me suppressed by you, my dear Crozon."

"That's possible, but—it isn't you alone whom he accuses."

"No, and it's precisely for that reason that I am almost sure of what I advance. If you will listen attentively to me, you will see how everything hangs logically together. The other one is Count Golymine, whom I knew by sight and reputation, and I am anxious to tell you, knowing as I do the life he led, that it is almost impossible that he ever met Madame Crozon. He lived in a society of interlopers in which he must have attached himself to numerous scoundrels, capable of writing anonymous letters, and of perpetrating a hundred other infamous deeds. Suppose that one of these scoundrels was interested in making away with a dangerous accomplice, and that accomplice was Golymine. Suppose, again, that this scoundrel was a foreigner; it is quite possible, since Golymine wasn't a Frenchman. All foreign adventurers form a sort of freemasonry among themselves, and if the aforesaid scoundrel was an American, for instance, he may have met you in Brazil, in Mexico, in Peru, in California, or at least have heard of you in those countries. Now, wherever you are known, you have the reputation of being a man whose eyes don't tremble, as you sailors say. It is known that you are not of a temper to submit to an outrage, that you have often fought, and that you have always killed or wounded your adversary. It is also known—don't get angry if I tell you the truth—it is known that you are of a violent disposition, and, that it has sometimes happened you have acted without reflection.

Crozon made a movement, but said not a word. Evidently he admitted to himself that the captain's estimate was correct.

"On these indications," continued Nointel, "my rogue constructed an ingenious plan. He thought to himself that by denouncing the Pole, he would make you a sort of executor of lofty—no, of low—deeds; that, listening to your anger alone, you would, without informing yourself, without admitting of any explanation, go and attack this self-styled count, and that you would kill him right out, either in a duel or otherwise. That is precisely what he wished; and to attain that end, it mattered very little to him if he calumniated a woman.

"That's a romance you are relating to me," said the husband, with a somewhat incredulous air. "An accomplice of the Pole's—accomplice in what? This Pole was a chief of brigands, then?"

"I won't swear that he wasn't, and I am certain that he had a multitude of misdeeds on his conscience."

"And it happens that this accomplice knows me!—that he knows I'm married! You suppose too many things. And then, why didn't he commence by designating this Golymine to me? Why would he have waited, before naming him to me, till I had returned to Paris and Golymine was dead?"

The objection certainly had some merit, but it did not embarrass the captain for a moment. "That's very simple," he said. "He did not denounce the Pole in the first letter, which you received at San Francisco, because you might, before returning to France, have written to a friend begging him to make inquiries, and because this friend would have answered you that the accusation was wanting in common-sense. The amiable knave who set this trap reserved the great stroke for your return. He reckoned on the effect of surprise and rage, and did not intend to give you time for reflection. Let us now examine the facts which followed, and you will see that everything explains itself marvellously well. By a singular chance—life is full of such chances—Golymine commits suicide, note this point, at the house of a woman whom he adored, for he killed himself because she refused to follow him abroad. More proof that the count did not occupy himself about Madame Crozon. There is Golymine dead, then. Your rascal of a correspondent has nothing more to fear from him. What does he do next? You arrived in Paris—on what day?"

"On Tuesday."

"And the Pole committed suicide on Monday; that is the way of it. The anonymous correspondent must have been informed of your arrival, which he no doubt watched for. Nevertheless, he waits until Saturday before writing to you. He collects his thoughts, he asks himself what advantage he could draw from these ignoble combinations. The machine was set up; but it could not grind Golymine—Golymine was dead; still it could serve some other purpose. Your vagabond said to himself that there was another man who walked the streets of Paris whose presence troubled him almost as much as Golymine's had done, and that he could rid himself of this man by launching you against him. He resorts to additional subterfuge; he keeps up your anger by that ridiculous story about the child, which, allow me to say so, my dear Crozon, you ought not to have heeded. He leaves you for three days to stew in your own juice—excuse the expression; Monsieur de Bismarck applied it to us Parisians. And, finally, when he thought the proper hour had come to let the storm loose, he denounced me—the troublesome man number two, and he was very careful to tell you that you would find me at the club between four and five o'clock. He chose a day on which he knew I should

be here. He foresaw all that would take place: your immediate visit, a duel rendered inevitable by violence on your part, and he knew besides that I am not very patient. And you see, my dear fellow, that the wretch's calculations were correct. If he knew that we were at this moment united in conference with the honourable Monsieur Bernache, your second, he would rub his hands and laugh in his beard. Fortunately, he didn't divine that we had long known each other, and that we should come to an explanation before we fought."

"One could not talk better," said the worthy engineer, enthusiastically, Nointel having just complimented him adroitly. "Crozon, my old fellow, you have only one thing to do, that is to embrace the captain, in the first place, and your wife next."

Crozon was evidently touched, but he was not yet convinced, and this showed itself plainly in his reply: "Yes," he murmured, "that might be—I ask no better than to believe you—and yet there are points in your reasoning which I don't understand. Explain to me why the letter denounces Golymine. He's dead. The villain who wrote the note had nothing more to fear from that Pole. What use was it speaking of him? And, since he accuses you, you who are living, you whom he wishes to put out of the way, why doesn't he also accuse you of being the father of the child?"

"Because the accusation would be too absurd; because it would not agree with the invention of a child hidden with a nurse who is being tracked throughout Paris, and who goes from house to house to escape the man who is after her. In good faith, do you suppose that if I was the father I should not have taken better precautions? I am well enough off to put such a child in safety, either in the provinces or abroad. I should ever have had heart enough to bring it up in my own home. And the anonymous writer knows that I live in the broad light of day; that I have never hidden my weaknesses. So he has attributed the paternity to Golymine, who is not here to defend himself. But the child doesn't exist, and has never existed. That story was only imagined, to exasperate you all the more. I have already told you so. You might also ask me why your correspondent did not bring me on the scene at the very first. Nothing prevented him from writing to you at San Francisco that Madame Crozon had had two lovers instead of one. You were certainly quite capable of killing two; but, you see, three months ago this man didn't occupy himself with me. The hatred he bears me has originated quite recently."

"You know him then!" exclaimed the whaleman.

"I think I know him, but I am not yet absolutely certain of it. He has never written to me. It is necessary that I should procure a few lines of his writing, and that requires a little time, for I have but few opportunities of meeting him. In a case like this, nothing must be done rashly, in order to avoid false steps. Grant me a delay and let me act as I think best. I am sure of succeeding, and I will force this mean fellow to confess before you that he has lied."

Crozon was silent. It could be seen in his face that he still hesitated between doubt and confidence. It was confidence which prevailed. "Very well!" he said bluntly, "take this letter. It is better for you to have it in your pocket to confound that bandit as soon as you have your proof. I only beg of you to act quickly. The day on which you demonstrate to me that he calumniated my wife, you will give me back my life."

This time, Nointel did not need to be begged to take the letter offered him by the whaleman, for he felt that the offer was made without reserve. He put Don José Simancas' composition into his pocket-book, which had become a store-house for convicting articles, for it already contained the sleeve-button found by Madame Majoré; and then to recompense M. Crozon for his conduct, he said to him:

"Now, my dear comrade, that all the misunderstanding has been cleared away, I can very well accept, if agreeable to you, the proposition made to me by Monsieur Bernache at the outset of this interview, when I was not disposed to submit to proofs. Will it please you to present me to Madame Crozon? I am ready to accompany you to her residence."

The whaleman became pale, but with delight. Nointel forestalled him in a desire which he had not dared to express, but which he was very anxious for at heart, since he replied in an agitated voice: "Thanks. You are a good fellow. You have divined that I am still not quite cured. Come."

To tell the truth, Nointel would gladly have dispensed with this visit to Madame Crozon, and if he offered to furnish the husband this proof of his innocence, it was merely in a spirit of charity, for an introduction under such circumstances did not amuse him. But he took pity on the sufferings of this poor jealous Crozon, and especially on those of his unfortunate wife. He said to himself that after this decisive proof the whaleman would finally calm himself and give up the ferocious idea of massacring his wife and child. And then he thought that a day might come when as the friend of Gaston Darcy he would congratulate himself on being on visiting terms with Berthe Lestérel's sister. He hoped by this means to learn that which he was now ignorant of; to gather fresh information which would aid him in defending the prisoner at Saint-Lazare. But what precautions would have to be taken—what caution would have to be observed to serve the cause of the younger sister without injury to the elder one! The captain did not conceal from himself the difficulties of the new situation, still he approached them gaily. Diplomacy had no more terrors for him than war.

As for Crozon, his mind was not yet freed from gloomy thoughts. He was somewhat in the condition of a man who, having fallen into water, regains his feet just as respiration is about to fail him. He felt relieved, but was not yet sure of his foothold, and was afraid of sinking again. Nevertheless, hope returned to him, and he began to dimly see the possibility of a happy settlement; and as this furious fellow, in spite of his faults, was an excellent man, at heart, he was anxious to be able to embrace his wife and his former comrade, in accordance with the advice prematurely given him by his friend Bernache.

The latter was overwhelmed with joy, and from the bottom of his heart he blessed the captain who had so victoriously preached peace. And, in truth, it would have been difficult to have pleaded better than Nointel had done. A great many lawyers would have envied him his concise reasoning, and his dexterous management of a case. It did not come from professional skill; but from tact, from a knowledge of human nature, qualities which are acquired elsewhere than at the bar, and which are not very rare with intelligent military officers. Nointel was deserving of all the more credit for his able discourse, as he believed only a part of what he said. Thus, he was sincere in affirming that the anonymous correspondent denounced the enemies whom he was interested in ridding himself

of by the hand of the whaleman. On that point he had no doubt, since he knew that the informer was Simancas; but he talked in opposition to his own convictions when he insisted that Madame Crozon had never failed in her duties, for he thought, on the contrary, that she had been acquainted with the Pole, and that a child had been born. That was the weak side of the defence, and the captain-advocate had performed a prodigy in obtaining from the husband-judge a provisional acquittal.

However, this success was nothing compared to that he had achieved in obtaining the letter from Don José without asking for it. He held this Peruvian scoundrel now, and he promised himself not to spare him. He perceived all the meshes of the plot laid by the rogue who had, in the first place, premeditated the killing of Golymine by M. Crozon, and who suddenly delivered of Golymine, had turned against Nointel, because he wished to prevent the latter from introducing himself into the society of the marchioness. The rascal looked upon Madame de Barancos as a gold mine, which he wished to work to his profit, and he would not suffer a stranger to embarrass him in his work by prowling about his lode.

"The affair was well conceived," said the captain to himself, as he descended the stairs of the club-house with M. Crozon and the engineer. "Simancas wrote to me that the marchioness would not receive to-day, simply because he wished Crozon to find me at the club. At the present moment he is congratulating himself on having manœuvred so cunningly, and hopes very much to learn to-morrow that I have received a good sword-thrust, which has settled me for ever. He does not suspect that he has just furnished me with a means of ruining him, and does not await the waking up which I have in store for him."

A cab stood at the door, the cab which was to have carried the two adversaries and their seconds to the duelling-ground. Nointel could not suppress a smile as he took his seat, for he found therein an entire arsenal; a box of pistols, a pair of foils, *minus* the buttons, and two broad-swords of huge proportions.

"The deuce!" said he to the whaleman, who took a place by his side, "I see that one or the other of us wouldn't have returned. Really, my dear fellow, we have done better to come to an explanation. To die by the hand of a comrade, would have been too hard. And we shall have a much better occasion for a brush when I have discovered the vagrant who wrote to you. We will kill him, eh?"

"It is I who will kill him," growled Crozon.

"Or I. I have as good a right as you to send that vagabond to the other world. If you like we will draw lots to see who shall fight him—admitting that he will consent to fight, for this informer is no doubt a coward."

"If he refuses, I will blow his brains out."

"Hem! he would only have his deserts, but then there is the Assize Court."

Nointel soon regretted having pronounced those words, for M. Crozon's face suddenly changed. He commenced thinking again about his sister-in-law whom he had in a measure forgotten. "Yes," he said with a gloomy air, "the assizes, where they send murderers to be tried. Berthe Lestérel will soon be there as a culprit, and my wife will be called there as a witness. All France will know that Jacques Crozon has married the sister of a jade."

This change was so sudden that Nointel, taken unawares, was at a loss

for the first time. He could think of nothing to say in reply, and the sailor quickly became excited in talking of this family trouble.

"Ah! look here, Nointel," he exclaimed, "when I think of what that wretched girl has done, all my anger and all my suspicions return—no, not all; I believe that you have been calumniated—but I say to myself that Mathilde and Berthe are both of the same blood—and that they have no doubt both fallen—that is why they sustain each other. The woman whom Berthe killed had been the mistress of that Pole—it was you who told me so."

"Oh! oh!" thought the captain, "he burns, the brute; if I don't interfere, he will divine everything."

"And that scene which I saw with my own eyes," continued Crozon, growing more and more animated; "my wife taken with an attack when her sister read an account of the suicide in the newspaper—"

"The account of a suicide might very well provoke an attack with a nervous woman," interrupted Nointel. "And, really, my dear fellow, I think you give way to your imagination for very trifling reasons. If it were necessary to attach importance to all the events in life, and to reconcile them and draw conclusions from them, one would end by becoming mad. You have just seen for yourself that appearances are deceitful. You accused me a little while ago; now, however, you no longer accuse me; and, with still greater reason, you must not put faith in fortuitous coincidences. But since you speak of Madame Crozon's illness, permit me to ask how you intend to introduce me. Of course, I will do whatever you please. But I think it necessary to be cautious with a suffering woman and not submit her to a test of theatrical effect, which, besides, might frustrate your object."

Crozon did not say a word. He was ruminating over his doubts. However, the obliging Bernache came to the captain's help. "My faith!" exclaimed that worthy man, addressing himself to his friend, "in your place, I should merely say to my wife: Here is Captain Nointel, whom I formerly knew when I was second officer on board the 'Jérémie,' and whom I have just found again in Paris. He is a good fellow. I hope we shall again see him often, and I introduce him to you. What is the use of inventing stories? The truth is always the best, and you will know just as well what to believe, since you are bound to try that means. As for me, I should fall back on the gentleman's declaration."

"I don't doubt him," said Crozon, quickly. "But Nointel understands me, I am sure of it. I wish to take a friend who assists me and advises me to my house—you are not married, you others—you are not jealous—you don't know what it is to live alone with a woman whom one adores and suspects. Ten times a day I pass from love to rage. There are moments when I control myself, so as not to fall at Mathilde's knees. There are others when I am seized with a desire to wring her neck. I remain for hours together looking at her, without speaking to her—and she, she passes all her time weeping. It will change—it must change—but I feel that I am not yet sufficiently sure of myself, or her—while, if I had a man there to encourage me by his words—by words such as Nointel knows how to find—I think I should soon be cured. You, Bernache, you are devoted to me like a brother, but you have passed three-quarters of your life in the boiler-room of a ship, and it is not there that a fellow learns how to understand women—or to talk well—you would try to calm me, and all you would say would only exasperate me."

"That is very possible," said Bernache, with a good laugh. "I don't understand much about these tricks; whereas the captain——"

"The captain is quite at your service, my dear Crozon," interrupted Nointel; "and I am delighted to see that you have full confidence in me. Monsieur Bernache is right. Present me as an old friend. I am yours in every sense of the term, and I will prove it to you. Permit me, however, to say to you that I shall not impose myself on Madame Crozon; and before going to your house again, I should like to be certain that my visits are agreeable to her. She is ill, you have told me?"

"Yes—to-day, however, she is better. She had just got up when I came out."

"You will ask her, I hope, if she wishes to receive me."

"Oh, she won't refuse. Since her sister has been arrested, she gives no expression to her will. It is only with great trouble that I force a word from her."

"Poor woman! what wouldn't I give to carry her some good news some day—and it isn't impossible that it will happen. I told you just now that I knew the examining magistrate who is entrusted with Mademoiselle Lestérel's affair—he is an excellent man, and I know that he interests himself in the accused, that he would be happy to find her innocent. I will see him, and if matters change in appearance, I shall be informed of it."

"They won't change. Berthe is guilty," muttered the whaleman. "It will be better not to speak of her to Mathilde."

"Quite so, as for the time being there is nothing new. But the cab is stopping; have we arrived?"

Nointel said this in the most natural tone possible, although he knew that the whaleman lived in the Rue Caumartin. Darcy had told him so. But as he had already entered the cab when Crozon gave the driver the address, he was not supposed to know it, and he did not neglect to play this little comedy which was destined to confirm the jealous husband in his good inclinations.

"Yes," replied Crozon; "I live here—on the fourth floor. You are no doubt better lodged than I am. Bernache, my boy, you can carry all this old iron back with you."

Bernache understood that his friend wished to rid himself of his company; and, as he was naturally very discreet, he hastened to take leave of the captain, who heartily granted him a firm grasp of the hand.

"A pretty duty he imposes on me, this sea-dog," said Nointel to himself as he went upstairs at Crozon's side. "And I shall often have to return here to preserve harmony in his household. I shall finish by having to play rough with him. Oh, Gaston! if you only knew what my friendship for you will cost me!"

The door of the room was opened by a housekeeper whom the captain looked at with some interest; he knew that she had been called before the magistrate on the day that Mademoiselle Lestérel had been arrested, and he was not sorry to be able to study the physiognomy of this servant who would play a part in the judicial proceedings. But Crozon did not give him the time to examine it. He ushered him into the parlour, furnished with Utrecht velvet, where Darcy had shortly before been received, and the captain suddenly found himself in presence of Madame Crozon, who was reclining on a lounge. He thought that the husband opened the interview thus intentionally, and he was perhaps

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not mistaken. But the test turned in his favour, and passed off well. The sick woman, on seeing him, manifested some surprise, as she had not expected the sudden visit of a stranger, but her manner was so natural that her husband's physiognomy at once expressed the liveliest satisfaction. It needed but little more to have made him throw himself upon Nointel's neck; and, indeed, in the fulness of his joy he forgot the recommendation that he himself had just addressed to his former comrade as well as his prejudices against Berthe.

After having named and presented Nointel to his wife, who remained somewhat indifferent, he added: "My dear Mathilde, I am sure that you will kindly receive my friend Nointel when he comes again to see you, for he knows Monsieur Darcy, the investigating magistrate, and he may sometimes be able to bring you news of your sister." Carried away by a sort of enthusiasm, the reassured jealous husband thus launched forth a sentence which troubled both Nointel and Madame Crozon.

The captain had anticipated everything except this declaration, and he was not at all prepared to explain to Berthe Lestérel's sister his relations with the Darcys. Still he put a good face on the matter. He had, on entering, assumed the gracious manner of a visitor who is about to be introduced to a lady; and he now assumed the air of a man who is obliged to approach a painful subject; but he did not lose his self-possession. Madame Crozon showed much less coolness. Since the arrest of Berthe, this was the first time in which the terrible whaleman had spoken kindly to her. He who had cursed the prisoner every day now seemed to interest himself in her. He also smiled at his wife, and the poor woman, accustomed to see him in a menacing mood, asked herself what could be the cause of this sudden transfiguration. She was ignorant of what had just taken place between Crozon and Nointel, but she knew that the magistrate was the uncle of the M. Darcy whom Berthe had brought to see her and who had offered to protect her against her husband's fury. Something told her that the friend of the uncle was probably the friend of the nephew, and that this captain whom she had never heard of before was disposed, like Gaston, to defend the weak. But she so greatly felt the peril of her position that she dared not risk either a word or gesture. Her eyes alone spoke. She looked attentively at both Nointel and Crozon, trying to detect on their faces the secret of their real intentions.

Nointel divined the anguish of the suspected woman, who feared falling into a trap, and he did his best to reassure her. "Madame," he said to her in that tone of frankness which had already persuaded the whaleman, "I do, in fact, know Monsieur Roger Darcy, and I am especially intimate with his nephew. I dare not promise you that my relations with the magistrate will allow me to be of use to Mademoiselle Lestérel, but I can assure you that Gaston Darcy and I interest ourselves deeply in her welfare, and that there is nothing we would not do to restore her to you."

This opening inspired Madame Crozon with confidence. Her features relaxed, tears of joy trickled down her pale cheeks, and her lips murmured her thanks. The captain observed all this while he was talking. He studied her, and, as he was a physiognomist, he quickly discovered the sentiments which swayed this wounded heart, and understood this weak and sensitive character. He caught a glimpse of the history of this orphan, married to a man she did not love, whom she could not love, struggling in the first place against the inclinations of an ardent nature, against the dangers

of loneliness, reposing all her affection upon her sister, an ardent affection such as her husband had not been able to inspire in her, and finally succumbing to the consequences of one of those incidents in Parisian life which connect two beings, one of whom seems to have been brought into the world expressly to bring misfortune upon the other. She had no doubt long resisted the seductions of that man Golymine; but, once the fault committed, she had surrendered herself to the current of passion, closing her eyes so as not to see the abyss towards which this current was sweeping her. Then the awakening had come—a frightful awakening, at the bottom of a precipice. Abandoned by her lover, wounded in the person of Berthe, she had lost all hope, and awaited death; and, indeed, if she trembled still, it was certainly not for herself.

“The child exists,” said Nointel to himself. “Mademoiselle Lestérel knows that it exists; it was perhaps to save it that she compromised herself, and it was certainly to recover Madame Crozon’s letters that she went to the ball at the opera house. Madame Crozon cannot be ignorant of the fact that Berthe has sacrificed herself, and she finds herself face to face with the dreadful alternative of allowing her sister to be condemned, or of delivering up her child to the vengeance of her husband. With such a situation as that, a drama would run for a hundred nights! And it devolves on me to arrange a settlement which shall satisfy everybody. An agreeable task, certainly! This is what comes of making friends! The deuce take Darcy, who has got himself into this scrape! It is necessary, however, that I should get him out of it, and I have but one means: to prove that Madame de Barancos killed Julia. When the magistrate holds her he will release Mademoiselle Lestérel, without requiring her to tell him what she went to the box for, and, above all, without bringing the Crozons’ domestic affairs into the case. It is against the marchioness that I must act in order to save the two sisters; and since the sea-dog is temporarily pacified, I have nothing more to do here.”

“My friend,” said the whaleman, warmly, “I thank you for coming to my help and that of my sister-in-law. I have often thought that she was guilty, but I shall be very happy if she turns out innocent, and, thanks to you, I no longer despair of seeing her again. You perform miracles—joy has just returned to my house—and it is you who have restored it.”

Nointel at once thought “Here is a man who is dying with the desire to throw himself at his wife’s feet and to ask her pardon. These husbands are all alike. I have already obtained a good result here, but I am not at all anxious to be present at the reconciliation between husband and wife, and so I will sound the retreat.”

“My dear fellow,” he continued aloud, “it is I who am under obligations to you, for you have been pleased to present me to Madame Crozon, and I hope she will allow me to come again to see you—but she is poorly, and I will now take leave of her by begging her to believe that I am entirely at her service and at yours.”

He was not mistaken. The whaleman was indeed anxious to conclude a conjugal peace, and those treaties are signed without witnesses. He did not try to detain his friend. On the other hand, Madame Crozon sufficiently recovered her speech to express a wish which she had not yet dared to formulate.

“I shall be for ever grateful to my husband; sir,” she said, with an effort, “for having brought you here, and to yourself for having had the goodness to interest yourself in my unfortunate sister. Since you are

pleased to take her part, perhaps you will consent to communicate to her judge a request—

"Whatever it may be, madame, you can be certain that my friend Darcy will take it upon himself to submit it to his uncle," interrupted the captain, graciously.

"I ask nothing impossible. I know that justice must run its course, and that Berthe must remain at its disposition as long as it is not demonstrated that she is innocent. But does it not lie with the magistrate who conducts the investigation to have her set at liberty—temporarily? I have been told that the law permitted him to do so."

"Yes, indeed, release on bail—I had not thought of that, neither had Darcy."

"My sister will not try to escape. She will submit to whatever surveillance they may impose on her—and if God does not permit her innocence to manifest itself, she will still be tried when the time comes, but she will not pass long days in prison, she will not suffer a useless martyrdom. I could see her each day, and sustain her during the cruel trial she will have to endure—"

Madame Crozon stopped short. She perceived that her husband was frowning, and her voice failed her. Nointel, who divined everything, hastened to reply in such a way as to stifle the suspicions which were again rising in the mind of the incorrigible husband.

"Madame," said he softly, "I doubt if Monsieur Roger Darcy will consent to what you desire, what I desire as much as yourself, what we all desire. Ah! if a murder was not in question—but the affair is so serious! I can, however, at least promise you that the request will be presented to him and warmly supported."

Then, without allowing the young woman time to insist, he bowed to her, and went out with the whaleman, who took him amicably by the arm to conduct him to the door, and who, hardly waiting till they reached the ante-room, began pressing him to his heart, exclaiming: "Nointel, I was mad—you have restored me my reason—I shall owe you my happiness—between us, now, it will be a friendship for life or death."

"Then you no longer suspect me," gaily said Nointel, who had considerable trouble in disengaging himself from Crozon's embrace.

"I no longer suspect any one—look here! when I think that I came near fighting with you—that I wished to kill Mathilde—I feel ashamed of having put faith in the calumnies of a wretch—"

"Whom I am going to look for without losing a minute, and whom I shall discover, I assure you."

"Ah! I will kill him."

"We will kill him between us, that's understood. Till we meet again, my dear Crozon; I shall look for a visit from you soon, and I shan't keep you long waiting for mine."

With this promise, the captain exchanged a last and vigorous pressure of the hand with the whaleman, and started precipitately for the stairs. "Ouf!" he muttered to himself as he fled away, "what a sacrifice I have just made to friendship! Here I am a Pacifator of Households. It was well worth the trouble of remaining a bachelor. But how many things I have learned within the hour! I see almost clearly through all the obscurities which Lolif has been trying to penetrate for the last three days. And I begin to feel pretty sure that Mademoiselle Berthe has neither a lover nor a knife-thrust on her conscience. The letters belonged to her

sister, I have no more doubt on that point. And if it were proved that the domino was found on the outer boulevard before three o'clock, I don't see why uncle Roger should refuse to release her temporarily. Crozon doesn't appear to care to see the prisoner again, but Madame Crozon is prodigiously anxious to do so. Why is she so anxious for that? She loves her sister, I know that very well, but the reappearance of Mademoiselle Berthe would cause her a deal of trouble, and would not, perhaps, prevent the affair from terminating at the Assize Court; besides, the husband would not fail to question Berthe; he would demand explanations of her; he wouldn't be satisfied with those the poor girl would give him, and, as he is tenacious, he might very well end by forcing from her some word which would compromise the elder sister."

Nointel said all this to himself in the middle of the Rue Caumartin, and, from his manner, the passers-by might very well have taken him for a lover gazing at the stars. "I have it!" he abruptly exclaimed, striking his forehead just like a poet who has suddenly found a long-sought-for rhyme. "The mother no longer has any news from her child, since Mademoiselle Lestérel is under lock and key. Mademoiselle Berthe alone knows where the nurse is. Perhaps she has carried devotion so far as to say that the child is hers. In any case she has taken good care not to give Madame Crozon's address; the husband was about to return, and this nurse might have been foolish enough to visit the Rue Caumartin. So now the communications are interrupted. Nevertheless, how is it that Mademoiselle Berthe did not tell her sister where she had put this child?"

Here Nointel paused again. He had lost the clue. But his sagacious mind soon recovered it. "Oh, yes!" continued he, after examining an idea which had suddenly occurred to him, "the affair might very well have occurred like this—Madame Crozon knew that her jealous husband was looking for the unfortunate infant. She was closely watched. She begged Berthe to take charge of the removal of the child. And Berthe effected that removal on Saturday night. She was arrested on Sunday before she was able to see her sister. That would explain how she spent that famous night—and her obstinate silence also; for, in order to justify herself, she would have had to expose Madame Crozon's conduct. It only remains to find the nurse—and she must live in the neighbourhood of Belleville, since it was in that direction that the domino was picked up. Ah! I will hunt her out——"

The captain again stopped to give audience to his reflections. And the result of his fresh meditation was that he uttered a great oath, followed by these words: "Threefold fool that I am! I had that nurse under my hand and I let her go. It's the stout woman who accosted me at Père-Lachaise to ask me if Mademoiselle Lestérel was in prison. She told me that she lived close to the cemetery, and she has quite the appearance of a nurse. I remember also that I remarked it to myself. How shall I catch her again? Search Belleville and its vicinity? I have other dogs to whip—Simancas for example. She has my card—fortunately, I gave it to her and told her that I might be of use to the incarcerated girl—she is not lacking in cunning, the old soul, since she invented that washer-woman story to lead me astray—perhaps she will decide some day or other to come and find me—if only to get her dues—at the end of the month. Very well, I will wait," concluded Nointel; "and while waiting I shall not lack work to do, for it will not suffice to demonstrate all I have just discovered by dint of reasoning. What a fine thing logic is? Roger

Darcy is an exacting magistrate. He requires a culprit, and I will bring her to him. I know where she is, but I can't yet go and take her out of her mansion. And then I have an account to settle with a scoundrel who shall be my bloodhound in hunting the marchioness. Come, my position is taken now. Off for Simancas!"

For at least ten minutes Nointel carried on this monologue on the muddy pavement of the Rue Caumartin, but he had not lost his time, for the complete plan of a campaign had gushed from his brain. He took out his watch and saw that it was scarcely five o'clock. Crozon had made his irruption into the club much before the appointed time. The conference in the visitors' parlour and the visit to Madame Crozon had not lasted so very long. Before going to dine, Nointel still had the time to carry on some offensive operations."

"Where shall I find Simancas?" he asked himself, in the first place. "He won't set his foot at the club as long as he has no news about the duel he prepared. He knows he would meet me there, and doesn't care to enter into explanations about the pretended indisposition of Madame de Barancos; indeed, he hopes I shall never ask him for any explanations, for he relies on the whaleman killing me to-morrow. I am pretty sure that at this hour he is with the marchioness; but that isn't the ground on which I wish to meet him. It is necessary, however, that I should attack him immediately."

That day was decidedly Nointel's day for ideas, for another one occurred to him just as he turned the corner of the Rue Saint-Lazare. He remembered that Saint-Galmier lived close by, in the Rue d'Isly, and that he gave consultations from five till seven. All the club knew this, for the doctor did not fail to proclaim it aloud each time he went there; and the announcement was not unsuccessful, for many of the members fancied he was a genuine doctor. Major Cocktail even declared that he had been cured by him of a nervous disorder of the stomach, due to the abuse of strong liquors, and Major Cocktail was certainly not a simpleton. Nointel, however, believed neither in the science nor the practice of this physician from Canada, but he presumed he would find him at home at the time he was reputed to receive his patients, and so he took his way without delay towards the Rue d'Isly. Saint-Galmier was no doubt associated in all Simancas' intrigues; moreover, he, no doubt, possessed the marchioness's secret just as Simancas did, for they had been together during that memorable night of the ball at the opera house. Having decided to approach the enemy at once, the captain resolved, since the chief kept out of sight, to fall, in the first place, on the lieutenant, who was within reach. It was merely a reconnaissance pending the battle; but he thought that this preliminary skirmish would improve his hand for the decisive engagement.

Saint-Galmier occupied the whole first-floor of a handsome new house, and Nointel, from the way in which the doorkeeper replied to him, saw at once that the doctor was of some consequence in the opinion of the landlord's representative. This did not surprise him, for he knew that scoundrels of a certain type pay their rent promptly, and are not niggardly in feeling subalterns. What astonished him more than this was to find that the physician from Quebec really had some patients. They took numbers on entering his office, numbers which were distributed by a negro in a red and green livery. This negro looked as though he were intended to beat the big drum on a charlatan's carriage. But, in a foreign *savant*, one must overlook a few fancies in bad taste, and, besides, the apartment

had a good appearance. Nointel was introduced into an austere furnished waiting-room, wainscoted with old oak, and with paper imitating leather; in the centre stood a large table loaded with albums; there were some cabinets in imitation buhl; an Aubusson carpet; a vast fireplace with a good wood-fire; several old pictures by unknown masters; and chairs upholstered in imitation of Beauvais tapestry. No vulgarities. The classic engraving which represents Hippocrates refusing the gifts of Artaxerxes was conspicuous by its absence.

And this room was not empty—far from it. Only it contained none but women. Saint-Galmier made a speciality of nervous diseases, and the stronger sex is much less inclined to nervousness than the other one. Nervousness shows itself in a variety of forms and serves a multitude of purposes. Nervousness is convenient; it can be utilised anywhere, even in travelling. It does not detract from one's beauty, and then the name is pretty. It is an ailment which one acknowledges in society, and which does not prevent one from leading a life of pleasure. But, to properly establish the fact that one is afflicted with the malady, one must at least seem to be nursing it, and nothing is easier. Saint-Galmier undertook to treat it according to a person's taste. He prescribed the treatment which best pleased the patient, and by this extra medical method he obtained very gratifying results. This was what he called his dietetic method, and his clients liked it amazingly. Nointel saw there some fat, thin, fair, dark, young and old women who appeared to be on a fair way to recovery, for they talked of nothing but the fashions and the news of the day. They were all exceedingly elegant; the celebrated doctor only gave advice to the rich, and required to be exceedingly well paid.

"The only person wanting in this foolish gathering is the Marchioness de Barancos," said the captain to himself, as he seated himself modestly in the darkest corner of the room. "The deuce take me if I suspected that this civilian aide-de-camp to the Peruvian general really practised medicine. I discover a Saint Galmier whom I did not dream of. Unless these women are mere walking ladies hired by the hour. Dash it all! That would be funny, but it isn't probable. In Paris there are always plenty of females who patronise mountebanks from abroad. Saint-Galmier understood that he needed a sign so as not to be accused of living entirely by his evil deeds; and he has chosen a profession which leaves him a great deal of liberty and brings him in a great deal of money. The rogue is as able as Simancas, and he is now doctor by appointment to the marchioness. But I am going to upset his plans a little. He scarcely expects to see me in his office, and he still less expects the hoist I am going to give him to begin with."

Nointel's entrance had produced a certain sensation among the nervous ones. No doubt they were not accustomed to meeting such good-looking cavaliers at their favourite doctor's. Conversation ceased, the hands which turned over the pages of the albums were still, and all eyes turned towards the handsome captain. But he pretended not to perceive that he was noticed. He had not come there in search of conquests, and, besides, Saint Galmier's patients did not tempt him in the least. He soon had the pleasure of ascertaining that the consultations did not last long. Ten minutes did not pass by without the office door being opened discreetly, and the doctor showing himself on the threshold; but Nointel was so well established in the depths of a corner that Saint-Galmier could not see him, for the room was feebly lighted by some lamps covered with shades. At

each apparition of the illustrious practitioner, one of the ladies rose in response to a gracious gesture, and entered the sanctuary, which had two ways of exit. She was thus seen no more, and, after a short time, another one succeeded her. Each passed in her turn, without dispute or noise, for Saint-Galmier only received well-behaved people, and his negro merely distributed the numbers as a matter of form.

Nointel had arrived the last, but his turn could not long be delayed, and while he waited he thought over something which had been on his mind since the night before, but over which he had not yet had time to ponder seriously. That Saint-Galmier and Simarcas lived in the closest intimacy was not to be doubted. Neither was it to be doubted that they had had interests in common with Golymine. What interests were those and on what was founded this union which had survived the Pole? At what dark deeds had these three adventurers worked together? Had they always limited themselves to turning feminine secrets to profit, or did there exist between them other ties created by more serious complicities? The last of these two suppositions seemed improbable, and yet Nointel did not reject it altogether, for he had an exceedingly bad opinion of this band of foreigners.

While he thus reflected, the room became rapidly emptied. There remained but one little woman, as plump and fresh as a rose, who had not at all the appearance of a woman tormented by the nerves, although she moved restlessly on her chair. The captain thought she had probably come to ask the doctor for a recipe to reduce her flesh, and he was amusing himself by examining her on the sly, when suddenly he heard some men's voices in the ante-room, that of the negro, probably, and another one stronger and deeper. It was the easily recognised noise of an altercation, and in this apartment, as silent as a church, the racket had a strange effect. The fat lady listened with a scandalised air, but all at once the door was opened violently, and an individual threw himself into the waiting-room, shouting to the coloured valet:

"I tell you I will go in, you big blackamoor. Haven't you ever tried Pears' soap? I have stood long enough waiting in the street, and I want to see the governor. I'm ill; I have come to consult him."

The negro did not dare follow this strange patient, who went and took his position astride a chair at the other end of the room without noticing any one. He was a big fellow, dressed like a workman in his Sunday best, wearing a soft hat which looked as though it had been banged down on to his head, and afflicted with a hang-dog face; a red nose, a mouth mis-shaped from the continual use of a pipe, and an earthy complexion. A true type of the prowler of the suburbs. "Oh! oh!" thought the captain, "Saint-Galmier has some fine acquaintances. He won't say that this rascal has a nervous attack. It is a man who has some business to settle with him. What business? I am really curious to know—and I will know. I must know it, even if I have to enter into conversation with this scamp."

The lady had prudently approached the door, and as soon as it was partly opened by the doctor, she precipitated herself into the private room with such impetuosity that Saint-Galmier had not time enough to look at the new patient who had just arrived. Nointel was invisible in his corner and kept himself there so quietly and effectively that the Canadian had no suspicion of his presence. The strange man made no attempt to pass in before the corpulent lady, but he swore between his

teeth, he balanced himself on his chair like a bear in a cage, and ended by rising and ensconcing himself near the entrance to the private office. "Good!" said Nointel to himself, "the scene promises to be amusing and instructive. I shan't lose a word. I am decidedly in luck to-day. Everything happens to the point. I am going to clear the boundary of Saint-Galmier's private life at the first leap."

And he crouched back as far as he could into his corner. The place was an excellent one for seeing without being seen, and the patient with the red nose did not seem to have noticed that any one was there. He stamped impatiently and uttered long growls from time to time. "He's thirsty," thought the captain, who knew this convulsive motion familiar with drunkards—"he's thirsty, and he has come to ask Saint-Galmier for the coin he needs to moisten his throat."

The chubby-faced lady did not encroach needlessly on the doctor's time, for, at the expiration of four minutes, the latter came to glance into the waiting-room which he expected to find empty; but, at the moment he raised the door hanging, his jovial face found itself nose to nose with the rubicund phiz of the strange visitor, and the following dialogue at once took place in accents loud and deep: "What! it is you again! What are you doing here? I prohibited you from coming here during my receiving hours."

"Perhaps so, but I couldn't get hold of you for the last two days, and I haven't a copper. So, as I don't live on air, I said to myself: I must take decisive steps! I will go and get my pay."

"And I, I am instructed to tell you that you are no longer wanted. The day before yesterday you received a gratuity; that will be the last."

"The last! have you finished, eh? The last! ah, dash it all, that would be a joke. And so, I shall have spoilt my complexion running about at night time in the streets. I shall have risked twenty times getting a nasty crack from a bad-mannered citizen—there are not many of them, but there are some—and all that for you to send me off without crying 'look out.' A servant has a right to a warning, when he's turned off. And I, I want eight months' warning—at a hundred and fifty francs a week—and that isn't too much."

"You are crazy."

"No, and the proof of it is that if you don't shell out, I shall go and tell my little story to the police commissary of the district. It is all the same to me if I go, you know where—for we three shall make the voyage together. You are amusing—you are and the general from Peru also. I shouldn't get low-spirited during the passage."

"Will you be quiet, you wretch! you may be heard."

"I don't care. Give me some coin or I will cry out louder."

"Are you sure that we are alone here?" continued the doctor, advancing to the middle of the room.

"How do you do, my dear fellow," said Nointel, springing up all at once.

Saint-Galmier almost fell backwards, but he had the presence of mind to step towards the strange man, slip a few louis into his hand and push him to the door saying: "Come to-morrow, my friend, to-morrow morning—I will give you a prescription—this evening I am in a hurry, and I must receive this gentleman."

The strange claimant, as much surprised as the doctor himself, did not seemingly care to continue this edifying conversation, before a wit-

ness. He allowed himself to be put outside, and the captain remained alone with the doctor.

"I disturb you, perhaps," said Nointel. "Just fancy! I have been here for half an hour, and I fell asleep in your chimney corner. In the midst of half a dozen pretty women it was unpardonable, but then it is so warm in this room! The voice of your last patient startled me out of my sleep."

"What! truly, you were asleep?" stammered Saint-Galmier, trying to recover his self-possession.

"Why, yes. I never in my life was able to do waiting in an ante-room without letting sleep overtake me. Twice in my life I had an audience with the Minister of War, and twice I took to snoring in his Excellency's waiting-room, and let my turn slip by. That infirmity lost me my career. But what was the matter with your last patient? He seemed to me to be dissatisfied."

"He's a poor devil whom I treat gratuitously, and who is angry because I prescribe for him a treatment which he does not like to follow. I preach sobriety to him, but he doesn't listen with that ear. All those alcoholised fellows are alike."

"Alcoholised! what pretty words are invented now. In the 5th Hussars we should have said, 'All those drunkards.' And so your patient has a weakness for strong liquors? It seemed to me, in fact, that he spoke of drink."

"Ah! you heard what he said?"

"A few words only—which appeared to me very incoherent—not a copper—drink—roam the streets at night. I understood nothing of all that, and I did not try to understand."

"The unfortunate fellow is partially insane. He also has a nervous disorder of the stomach, and I despair of curing him. But you, my dear captain, are you in need of my services?"

"I, doctor? Thank God! no. My brain is in a good condition, and as to my stomach—well you saw my performance on Sunday at the Maison d'Or. That robin *pâté* was memorable. You ought to give me the recipe."

"Was it to ask me for it that you have honoured me with this visit?"

"Not exactly. I have come to have a little explanation with you."

"Whatever you wish. Take the trouble, then, to come into my office, my consultation time has not yet quite expired, and if we remain here we run the risk of being disturbed."

"By the alcoholised gentleman?"

"No, by a tardy patient. You cannot imagine to what an extent women are careless."

The office was large and not even as well lighted as the waiting-room. Heavy green hangings deadened the voice there. It would be difficult to imagine a place more propitious to secrecy. A doctor is a confessor, and Saint-Galmier, who religiously followed all professional rules, closed and bolted the door after having introduced Nointel. He made him sit down close to himself, and said to him with his most gracious air: "I am now quite ready to furnish you with the information you need. Excuse me for not offering you a cigar. You understand—I receive here few people but nervous women—extra-nervous even—the smell of tobacco would cause them to faint. It is really information which is in question?"

"I said an explanation, but I do not stand to the word. I merely want to know why you went, last Tuesday, just a week ago, to call on Julia d'Orcival, at her residence on the Boulevard Malesherbes."

The doctor gave a slight start, which did not escape the captain's attentive eye. "I am impertinent, am I not?" continued Nointel.

"Not at all, not at all," replied Saint-Galmier, with perfect courtesy. "Allow me to collect my thoughts. It was, you say, last Tuesday?"

"Yes; the day following Count Golymin's death."

"In fact, I remember now. Why, it is very simple. I went to see the poor woman because she sent for me, wishing to consult me."

"She was ill, then?"

"Oh, nothing serious. A slight attack in the—yes, in the face. That suicide had produced a very deep impression on her; the shock had brought on nervous—"

"And as she knew you to be the first doctor in the world for the treatment of excited nerves, she addressed herself to you. Nothing is more natural. You did not know her before this visit?"

"Not otherwise than by sight."

"And since then—you did not return to see her again?"

"Why, no. It would have been useless. The treatment I had prescribed cured the patient in twenty-four hours. And I bitterly regret having too quickly succeeded in ridding her of an inconvenience which, if it had been further prolonged, would, undoubtedly, have prevented her from attending the ball at the opera house, where death awaited her."

"What would you have, doctor! It was written above on the great roll. When fate is in question, nothing can be done. It was Julia's destiny to die at the masquerade ball. It is yours, perhaps, to help me in discovering the villanous woman who killed her."

"I! but I know no more about this sad affair than yourself," said Saint-Galmier, with a vivacity which made the captain smile. "I was at the opera-house with Simancas in a box next to that of Madame d'Orcival, but we saw absolutely nothing. The investigating magistrate thought it his duty to call us before him yesterday: 'we declared to him that, to our great regret, we were not in a position to give him any information.'"

"I understand that; but perhaps you could tell me—who am not the examining magistrate—from what motive, when you went to see Julia last Tuesday, you announced yourself as having come on behalf of my friend Gaston Darcy?"

The thrust was as straight as it was unexpected, and the doctor was taken off his guard. He blushed to the ears, and replied, in a choking voice: "It is a mistake; you are badly informed, captain."

"Perfectly well informed, on the contrary. You told Julia—who had not sent for you, for the excellent reason that she was not ill—you told her that Darcy had sent you to obtain news of her. You added that you were the intimate friend of the said Darcy. And, excuse my frankness, those two statements are incorrect."

"I protest," stammered Saint-Galmier, who was moving restlessly on his chair, "Madame d'Orcival cannot have told you that."

"No, for I did not see her, but I have seen her maid."

"Her maid?" the doctor repeated mechanically, beginning to lose his head.

"Yes, a certain Mariette; a very intelligent girl, upon my word. She came to see Gaston Darcy yesterday morning. You observe that I am

precise ; I happened to be there, and in my presence she said all that I have just told you. You will, I suppose do me the honour of believing me?"

"I believe you, my dear captain, but this woman may have invented——"

"It is not to her interest to lie. However, if you dispute her statements, there is a very simple way of deciding the matter, and that is to bring you together. I will go and find her ; there will be an explanation between you, and——"

"It is useless ; her words are not worth refuting by me, and I hope that you will yield to me in that."

"I see that you do not understand the situation," said Nointel, coldly. "If it was merely a question of ascertaining whether you or this maid had adulterated the truth, I should not trouble myself in the matter. Your affairs are not mine, and it matters very little to me that you introduced yourself at Julia d'Orcival's under one pretext or under another. But my friend Darcy is not in the same situation ; he regards it as wrong that you should have used his name without his authority ; he is hurt at the use you made of it, and you, no doubt, divine that it is he who sends me here."

This last blow dismounted Saint-Galmier entirely. The unfortunate doctor was not bellicose, and the prospect of a duel frightened him considerably. At any cost, he wished to avoid the battle, and sought for a means of satisfying Darcy without exposing his skin.

"And so," continued the captain, "I beg of you to at once name one of your friends, that we may agree together on the conditions of the meeting. Darcy is desirous that everything should be terminated within twenty-four hours. Should you decide to choose General Simancas, I should soon arrive at an understanding with him, and we should advance rapidly."

While Nointel was talking thus, the doctor had already found a mode of escape out of the bad fix in which he was placed. "Never," he exclaimed, "never will I fight with Monsieur Darcy, who inspires me with the deepest sympathy. I would rather admit that I did wrong in using his name."

"Excuse me, that will not suffice. It is still necessary that you should tell me why you made use of it, or rather, abused it."

"You exact it? Very well, although it deeply hurts my professional self-love to make this avowal to you, I must tell you that I had long desired to count Madame d'Orcival among my patients ; she had very fine connections, and could have been exceedingly useful in introducing me into a circle where nervous complaints are very frequent. Unfortunately, I did not know her, and I did not dare to ask Monsieur Darcy to introduce me. When I learned that she had just broken off relations with him, I entertained the unfortunate idea of practising a piece of deception, which appeared to me innocent enough. I have been doubly punished for my imprudence, however, for I did not obtain an entrance to her society, and I have offended a man whom I hold in the highest esteem. Will you please to tell him that I am grieved at what has happened, and that I beg of him to accept my excuses."

"That is already something, but that is not enough. Darcy will require a written apology."

"I will write it at your dictation, if you consider it necessary to efface all trace of misunderstanding between your friend and myself."

At this moment the doctor imitated those seamen who throw a part of the cargo into the waves to lighten a storm-beaten vessel, and he was willing to make the sacrifice of his honour if he could thereby evade telling the truth as to the motive of his visit to Julia's. He would have accepted many other humiliations rather than have revealed his former relations with Golymine. 'But he was mistaken in believing that he would get off so cheaply.'

Nointel thought: "The coolness of this rogue surpasses all I could have imagined, and I shall draw nothing from him by these roundabout means. He lies with superlative self-possession and ease. To overcome him, to get him under my feet, I shall have to strike harder."

"That will do, will it not, captain?" continued Saint-Galmier. "I will word the letter in such a form as you please, and you will charge yourself with reinstating me in Monsieur Darcy's favour."

"No, that will not do," replied Nointel. "Darcy will be satisfied with the letter you are going to write him; Darcy will not oblige you to fight with him—that would be too difficult—he will even keep silent in regard to this affair, which, if it should get abroad, would greatly damage your practice and your standing; but don't flatter yourself that he will forget it. Between you and me, doctor, I don't believe that he will ever recognise you again."

"What! he will attach so much importance to a slight mistake on my part! I shall never console myself for having, by my own fault, lost an acquaintanceship which I felt greatly honoured by. I hope, at least, dear sir, that you will not be so severe with me."

The captain, instead of replying, rose and began to walk up and down the office whistling a military march. Saint-Galmier, surprised and troubled, also rose and tried to divert himself. "You are looking at that *Madeleine* in the desert," he said, pointing to a large picture which hung opposite to a bust of Hippocrates, the father of medical art. "It is a fine work, although not signed. It is attributed to Carrache. One of my patients made me a present of it last year."

"As a thank-offering for having cured her of a nervous affection? Ah, yours is an agreeable profession, and I can understand that you value its practice. But tell me, does General Simancas also treat people who are afflicted with nervousness?"

"Simancas! I don't understand you."

"I ask you that because your alcoholised gentleman of a little while ago seemed to know him."

"You are joking, captain."

"Not at all. That unruly patient spoke about a Peruvian. Now, there are not many Peruvians in Paris. I even remember very well what he said while fuming against you and this Peruvian, who can be none other than your friend Simancas. He said 'I am sent away, my pay's stopped, but that won't be the end of it. I shall go and find the commissary, and will tell him everything.'"

"It is impossible that you should have heard that—and, besides, there is no sense in those words——"

"Yes, yes there is. The amiable drunkard also made use of others. He added that he should no doubt be sent beyond the seas, but that he should not go alone. He asserted that you would be three to make the voyage together."

"You know well that this man is insane," exclaimed Saint-Galmier, who became visibly pale.

"If he is, I advise you to have him shut up as soon as possible," said Nointel quietly. "If you leave that fellow at liberty—Ah! there's some one knocking! Can he have returned by the other door?"

The doctor started, and ran to the door that Nointel indicated, probably with the intention of bolting it. Some one had knocked three times, at intervals, and in a peculiar way. Saint-Galmier arrived too late, however. The door opened and General Simancas entered, with a cautious step, into his friend's office. Saint-Galmier would gladly have abandoned his whole practice to have been able to extricate himself from the painful position in which he found himself. Under any other circumstances, the arrival of an auxiliary would have been exceedingly agreeable to him, but Simancas had just been brought into the controversy by Nointel, and his presence could but complicate matters; so the unhappy doctor did not receive the Peruvian very graciously.

On the other hand, this unexpected apparition filled the measure of Nointel's desire. To hold the two rascals at the same time was a piece of good fortune he had not hoped for, but which he now at once prepared himself to profit by. The moment had arrived to settle with both confederates at one stroke, but he had to decide between two plans which had already presented themselves to his mind; either to make them confess what they knew as to the doings of the marchioness at the ball, or confine himself to prohibiting their visits to her. The captain thought that before deciding on his course, it would be well to prove to them that they were at his mercy. With Saint-Galmier this was already almost accomplished. It now remained to attack Simancas, who appeared to be somewhat disconcerted. The rogue had little expected that he would meet in his accomplice's office the man who for two days past he had been trying to rid himself of by radical measures.

"Good day, general," said Nointel to him, without offering his hand; "I am exceedingly glad to see you. You were so obliging as to write to me to save me a useless journey. I wish to thank you for this delicate attention."

"I merely acquitted myself of a duty," replied Simancas, with visible embarrassment. "The Marchioness de Barancos expressly desired me to notify you that she did not receive."

"And you hastened to obey her. Nothing is more natural. Then she is altogether indisposed, this dear marchioness?"

"Yes, very indisposed. I have come on her behalf in search of Saint-Galmier, who has not his equal in the treatment——"

"Of nervous affections, that is known. When I have one, I shall apply to him. You think, perhaps, that you surprised me just as I was in the act of consulting him! No, we were merely chatting about a visit he paid last week to poor Julia d'Orcival. And you arrive just in time, for you also went to see Julia; you went the same day as the doctor."

"I! I swear to you that——"

"Don't swear. I have seen the servant who admitted you both, the one after the other. It seems that your friend Saint-Galmier went to offer his services to Madame d'Orcival, and that you went to ask for certain information about Count Golymine."

"But, captain, I protest, I——"

"Again! it's altogether useless. I am perfectly well informed, and

we will presently return to the subject, but that is not in question just now."

"What is in question, then?" said Simancas, while trying to assume a dignified air. "One would think you were preparing yourself to submit me to an examination."

"One would not be mistaken."

"Allow me to tell you, sir, that the tone you assume with me is most inexplicable."

"I will explain it to you, then. Do you know a man who commands a whaling vessel from Havre—a man whose name is Jacques Crozon?"

Simancas drew back as though he had received a blow on the chest, and he lacked the strength to articulate a denial.

"Jacques Crozon is married," continued Nointel; "he has just returned to Paris after an absence of two years, and during the time he was at sea, his wife became acquainted with Goly mine. It seems, indeed, that she had a child by him."

"I don't know why you are relating this affair to me," stammered the general.

"Really! You astonish me. Very well, learn then that some wretch informed Jacques Crozon of his wife's conduct, and that this wretch was intimately connected with Goly mine. It is ignoble, isn't it, general?"

The Peruvian only replied by a smothered growl, and Nointel quietly continued: "Why does this scoundrel thus betray his friend? I don't know, and it matters little to me. What interests me far more is that Goly mine being dead, the author of these anonymous letters has thought fit to write to the husband that I also had been his wife's lover—that I had succeeded the Pole in her affections. It must be well understood that this was an infamous untruth, but the result of this untruth was intended to be a duel to the death between Jacques Crozon and myself. A mere pretext invented by the slanderer for ridding himself of me, Crozon passing for a most able duellist. What do you think of this plot, general?"

"I think," growled Simancas, "I think that it never existed except in your imagination."

"You are mistaken. I have proofs of it. The informer did not suspect that I had known Crozon for a dozen years—What is the matter, general? That surprises you, eh? You did not suppose that an ex-officer of hussars would ever have met a captain in the merchant service. Nothing is more correct, however, and so my old friend Crozon came and showed me the letter he had received. We came to an explanation, and I had no trouble in proving to him that I had been odiously calumniated. He has charged me with the discovery of the slanderer, and proposes killing him as soon as I have discovered him. He isn't joking, and he has a steady hand. He has never fought without killing his man. And if, by chance, he should miss this unworthy adversary, I shall be there to take his place, and I will answer for it that he will not escape me."

"That would be proper," said the general, trying to assume an air of indifference.

"That is your opinion? Then you would bear no ill feeling against me if I procured my friend Crozon the satisfaction of sending you into the other world."

"How! what means——"

"It means that you are the informer," said Nointel, looking Simancas straight in the eyes.

"Captain ! this jesting——"

"Do you wish me to show you your last letter ? I have it in one of my pockets, and in the other there is a loaded revolver. I would not advise you two to try violence with me ; neither would I recommend you to make a denial, for I have the proof that this letter is in your writing ; since you have committed the foolishness of sending me a means of comparison."

"Exceedingly well, sir. I am at your orders," said the Peruvian, feeling the need of replying with boldness. •

"Good ! you admit it, then ?"

"I admit nothing, but——"

"Do not let us bandy words, I beg of you. You consent to give us our rights, because you cannot do otherwise. But I suppose that, if it should please us not to avail ourselves of our rights, you would not protest against our decision."

"It is certain that it would be painful for me to fight against a man whom I esteem."

"And who does not esteem you. Very well, it depends on you to avoid this hard necessity, and at the same time to avoid other mishaps of the same kind—mishaps which your friend Saint-Galmier fears enormously."

The two partners exchanged a rapid glance, and Simancas read in the doctor's eyes that it would be as well to seize upon the opportunity which offered itself for a capitulation.

"You have an arrangement to propose to me ?" asked the general.

"A truce. Will you please to listen to me ? I am certain that you have both been the accomplices of Golymine in affairs which I am not over anxious to know anything about. You knew that he had been Madame Crozon's lover, and you wished to have him killed by the husband, because you were afraid that he would betray you."

"And supposing that were so ?" exclaimed Simancas, impudently. "We conspired together in Peru, and Golymine would have sold our secrets to our political enemies."

"I don't think that politics had anything to do with this affair, but it matters little to me ; and however that may have been, it was not for the same reason that you wished to be rid of me. Here's the reason : You have just introduced yourselves into the society of Madame de Barancos. By what means ? I don't trouble myself as to that, but I can see very well that you propose using the marchioness to your advantage. She is exceedingly rich, she lives in fine style, and you are anxious to reign in her house without a rival. Now, you learned that Madame de Barancos intended to receive me, and even to receive me often. You said to yourselves that I should greatly embarrass you, and you thought of delivering me over to Crozon, who was to dispatch me within twenty-four hours."

"I assure you, sir, that you deceive yourself," said Simancas. "Madame de Barancos received me favourably, that is true, but I have not pretended to——"

"Enough ! I am sure of what I say, and here are the conditions on which I consent neither to denounce you to Crozon nor to others. If you accept them, I will be silent concerning all I know, and, in appearance,

I will live with you on the same footing as in the past. I must, in the first place, be free to see the marchioness. The furlough I received to-day, on her part, came from you; I am certain of it. I also demand to be invited by her, and within the next two days, to a dinner, a ball, a shooting-party—in a word, to take my place in her intimacy. It isn't her money I am aiming at, and I won't try to have you driven from her residence."

"Madame de Barancos asks no better than to see you often, sir, and I shall not need to use the influence you attribute to me, in order——"

"That is the first point," continued the captain, without deigning to reply to this protestation. "Here is the second one: I mean that you shall cease denouncing Jacques Crozon's wife. On receipt of the first anonymous letter by the husband, I will settle with you, and you know that I have various ways of coming to a settlement. And so, not a line, not a word, not a step. I wish my friend Crozon to believe that he has been the victim of an odious hoax."

"It was one, without doubt," muttered Simancas, timidly.

"No, it wasn't one, you know exceedingly well, and I now come to my last condition. There is a child. Where is it?"

"On my honour, I know nothing about it."

"Leave your honour alone; and answer me categorically. Where was Madame Crozon confined?"

"At the house of a midwife who lives at the top of the Butte Montmartre, Rue des Rosiers, I believe."

"In whose care was the child placed?"

"In that of a nurse who has long been sought for and whose track was lost just as she was about to be found."

"Last Saturday, was it not?"

"No, on Sunday—it had been finally ascertained that she lived in the Rue de Maubeuge, at the farther end of the street—at No. 249. The place was visited, but she had moved the night before with her charge. She occupied furnished rooms there, had gone off without saying where she was going—and, to be brief, she was not found."

"Her name?"

"Monnier—a false name, very probably."

"That suffices for me," said Nointel, who saw very well by the clearness of Simancas' answers that he knew no more and did not lie. "As an earnest, I expect a note of invitation from Madame de Barancos. When she receives me, I shall not speak to her of the one you were pleased to write to me, and I shall no more occupy myself about you than if you did not exist—unless you should violate our agreement, in which case I shall be pitiless. The marchioness pleases me infinitely, but she won't turn my head to the extent of making me lose my memory. I have said my say. Now, how does one get out of here, doctor?" Saint-Galmier hastened to open the door leading into the waiting-room, and the captain went his way giving utterance to this farewell: "By the way, I recommend you to look after that alcoholised gentleman. He is a brute and a gossip who might very well serve you a bad turn."

The doctor whispered not a word. He conducted Nointel as far as the ante-room where the negro in livery awaited the patients, and returned in all haste to rejoin Simancas and confer with him respecting what had taken place.

When Nointel found himself in the street again, he took extreme

pleasure in lighting a cigar—a pleasure known only to workmen who hear the bell strike the hour for repose after a day of laborious work. He went slowly towards the Rue d'Anjou, his heart light and his mind active, delighted with the opening of his campaign, and ready to pursue it to its final success. "That's good work," he said to himself; "and if Darcy isn't satisfied, he will be hard to please. I have the key to the position, since I hold the two rascals who hold the marchioness; and I have not delivered them my secret. I did not say a word to them about the crime at the opera house. They think I am in love with Madame de Barancos: perhaps that I wish to marry her, and that I have profited by what I know against them, to have the doors of her mansion thrown wide open to me. They will fight against me underhand, I know that, but they won't dare to attack me to my face. If I had forced them to denounce the marchioness, or if I had forced the marchioness to drive them away, I should have spoiled Berthe's affair. That would have been striking the great blow too soon, I have not enough proofs yet. I shall have them in a week or in a month—I shall have them ultimately at all events, and, in the meantime, I have assured the tranquility of the Crozon household; I know what innocent Berthe Lestérel did on the night of the ball; I am on the track of the nurse, and one of these days I shall be able to inform the mother that the child is in good health. Upon my word of honour, the Monthyon prize of virtue is given to those who deserve it less than I do. Yes, but 'we must cultivate our garden,' said Candide; and our garden is the marchioness."

II.

A WEEK has passed—a century to those who hope and those who suffer. Gaston Darcy hoped; Berthe Lestérel suffered. Berthe is still in close confinement in the prison. She prays, she weeps, she looks at the scrap of sky which she can scarcely perceive through the bars of her cell-window, and she thinks of the sweet life of other times—the life of her youth—so suddenly brought to a close. She thinks of her sister, who is dying of sorrow; of her protectress, Madame Cambry, whom she loved so much, and who now, perhaps, disowns her, because she thinks her guilty; she thinks of Gaston, who had sworn eternal love to her, and who, no doubt, has already forgotten her. The hours pass slowly, monotonously, without bringing the poor recluse a single friendly *souvenir*, a single kind wish—nothing, not even the least news from the world she will never more enter. This cell with its whitened walls is a tomb. Not a sound from outside penetrates into it—not a ray of sunlight. When the door opens, Berthe only sees the Sisters of Marie-Joseph, in long woollen garments, veiled in black and in blue, walking with the noiseless tread of phantoms along the gloomy passage. Three times already she has been summoned to go to the Palais de Justice, and a horrible journey in a prison van has not been spared her. Three times has she seated herself in the office of the investigating magistrate, who is always grave, always impassive. She has been politely, coldly questioned, and has replied only with tears. Three times has she returned to Saint-Lazare in despair. She feels herself lost, and expects nothing more from human justice. She no longer has any faith except in God, who reads the hearts of mankind.

Gaston Darcy endures another torment—the torment of suspense, the

anguish of incertitude. He has broken off from his habitual life ; he looks upon society with horror ; he avoids all diversions, and takes pleasure only in the bitter joys of isolation. He sees but his uncle, Madame Cambry and Nointel. His uncle receives him, pities him, and remains impenetrable. Madame Cambry shares his troubles, grieves with him ; swears that Berthe is not guilty, and that she will never cease defending her ; she has even gone as far as to proclaim that she will not marry as long as her young friend is under this terrible accusation. However, her marriage with M. Roger Darcy is determined upon, and M. Roger Darcy presses her to conclude it ; for the severe magistrate has finished by being completely captivated with the charming widow, and he no longer wishes that his nephew alone should charge himself with perpetuating the family name. But Madame Cambry can effect nothing against his judicial convictions ; she cannot induce her future husband to decide against his conscience, and sign an order setting Berthe Lestérel at liberty.

Nointel remains. Nointel is more devoted, more eager than ever ; he affirms to his friend that he is not losing a moment ; that he pursues his investigations slowly but surely ; that he receives fresh information every day, that all his information is favourable to Berthe ; that he unites every scattered proof, or rather beginnings of proof, and will soon be in a position to demonstrate the young girl's complete innocence ; still, he has plainly declared that, to succeed, he must act alone. And as Gaston cries out against the inaction to which Nointel wishes to condemn him, Nointel supplicates him to allow him to follow his own course without on that account abstaining from working on his own side to bring about Made-moiselle Lestérel's rehabilitation.

Pressed to explain himself on the results obtained, the captain persists in replying that all goes well, and that for the moment it is impossible for him to say more. Of his meeting with the whaleman, of his visit to Madame Crozon, of his agreement with the two rascals from across the seas, he has not breathed a word. He mistrusts the thoughtless impulses which carry lovers beyond the limits of prudence. His batteries are in position, and he fears that Gaston might disturb his aim. And Gaston, who does not appreciate the reasons for this extreme reserve, has ended by taking his discretion unkindly. Gaston has almost come to the conclusion that Nointel has abandoned him ; that Nointel is hiding an unpardonable defection under a more or less plausible pretext. Such, then, is the situation. For some days Gaston has lived alone and in gloom, cursing humanity, even friendship, and hoping nothing from the future. And, nevertheless, one evening towards eleven o'clock, Gaston is dressing to attend a ball. He had received, at the end of the preceding week, an invitation from the Marchioness de Barancos to a grand entertainment, and certainly the crested card which adorned the glass of his dressing table would not have sufficed to persuade him to attend a *fête* while Berthe Lestérel wept in the depths of a prison. But that same morning, two letters had come to him by post—two letters which had immediately aroused him from his torpor. One was from Nointel, and it contained these few lines : “ Come this evening to the ball at Madame de Barancos’. You will find me there. I have gained a foothold in the place. All goes well. We are reaching the end. Come ! It is necessary ! ”

Gaston had not found this note much clearer than his recent conversations with the captain. But he could hardly neglect so formal a recommendation, and had almost decided to accept the invitation from the

marchioness, when he unsealed the other letter, which was from his uncle, and read as follows:—"My dear Gaston,—I shall this evening accompany Madame Cambry to the ball given by Madame de Barancos. It is the first time that Madame Cambry has consented to go into society since she has suffered the misfortune which touches you so deeply, and which has greatly affected herself. You know that my marriage with her has been decided upon. Her return to society will be almost an event. Come to this *fête*. I shall be all the more pleased to see you there as all my time at the Palais de Justice to-day will be occupied by the affair I investigate, and I shall not be able to go and see you. At will, besides, be better that Madame Cambry should herself tell you some news which it would have given me great pleasure to have brought you if I had the command of my time. I rely on our seeing you this evening, and I am certain that you will not regret having left the retirement in which you confine yourself to the great sorrow of your affectionate uncle."

The reading of this letter had re-awakened the hopes dormant in Gaston's heart. This news which Madame Cambry was anxious to inform him of, which certainly concerned Berthe, could not be bad, or M. Roger Darcy would not have been in such a haste to write that letter to his nephew. Had he finally acknowledged the prisoner's innocence, or was some fortunate discovery the only matter in question—some clue recently obtained which allowed a belief in the possibility of an acquittal? There was one disquieting sentence: "The affair I investigate," wrote the magistrate, who knew the value of words, and who would not have made use of the present indicative if the investigation had been abandoned. And yet Gaston could not admit that M. Roger Darcy attached so much importance to informing him of a relatively insignificant fact. Besides, Nointel's note was pressing. And so Gaston accepted the marchioness's invitation, although it seemed to him very hard to have to go to a ball with anguish in his soul. Still, after reflecting upon the chances offered to him by this entertainment, he had come to the conclusion that it was best not to do the things by halves, and that he had better go to the party with a smiling face, waltz with Madame de Barancos—in a word, accept all the consequences of the duty he had resigned himself to.

To prepare himself, he spent the day by his fireside: dined lightly, slept after dinner, woke up feeling refreshed and lucid after a nap of two hours, and then proceeded to dress himself with special care. Mourners are out of place at a ball, and the best way for him to serve Berthe's cause was to hide the fact that her misfortunes bereaved him of hope. Shortly after midnight, his brougham being already at the door, he stepped into it, and ten minutes later his coachman fell into the line at three hundred steps from Madame de Barancos' residence.

This princely dwelling adjoined the Parc Monceau. The windows were resplendent with the light of a thousand tapers, and the harmonious sounds produced by the orchestra, passed through the hangings into the dry night atmosphere, like the distant vibration of an Æolian harp. After passing through the gilded gateway, the equipages turned at a slow trot, and stopped before a majestic flight of steps, adorned with exotic plants. The guests might have thought that they were alighting at Havana, for all sorts of tropical flowers were blooming in the vestibule, as spacious as a greenhouse. At the entrance to this winter-garden stood two statues in onyx—Nubian slaves bearing silver lamps—and from a clump of camelias sprang a colossal bear—a bear which had come from Russia, where it

had no doubt devoured a large number of moujiks. Darcy alighted amid an army of footmen in a livery of amaranth and gold, gave a glance at a magnificent Venetian mirror to assure himself that his toilet had suffered no derangement during the short journey from the Rue Montaigne to the Avenue Ruysdael, and then with the ease of a man of the world, entered a room where stood the incomparable Marchioness de Barancos prepared to receive her guests.

She wore a charming toilet: a dress of white satin, covered with bunches of red flowers, and secured at the shoulders with large sapphire clasps; three rows of pearls round her neck; a wreath of diamonds on her forehead; and buckles set with diamonds on the delicate shoes which covered her feet, the prettiest ones in the world. Her eyes glowed brightly, her mouth was bewitching in expression, her velvety skin had that warm tint which increases in brilliancy under the effect of artificial light. To the expression of anxiety which at moments had clouded her face on the evening of the performance of "*Le Prophète*" had succeeded an air of joy and pride. One divined that this creole was happy to live, to be rich and beautiful. Women who love often have this appearance.

Darcy, on seeing her look thus triumphant, felt heart-sick. It seemed to him impossible that the hand she so graciously extended to him could have struck Julia d'Oreival, that the frank smile which lighted up her charming features, could hide remorse. And he knew that for Berthe to be innocent it was necessary that Madame de Barancos should be guilty.

He saluted her, however, as correctly as possible, but he had scarcely the courage to murmur one of those meaningless phrases which form the necessary accompaniment to a guest's arrival. She did not allow him time to finish his insipidities. "You are a thousand times amiable for having come," she said to him graciously, "for I know that you have cloistered yourself since our meeting at the opera. And since your retreat is ended, I hope that you will not find my guests wearisome. Your friend, Monsieur Nointel, is here."

Gaston bowed, and made way for two American ladies, who advanced with a rustling of silk and a tinkling of jewels. He passed on and entered the ball-room, where dancing had already commenced. It was a wonderful picture of gold-embroidered hangings, gilded furniture, rare plants, and elegant women—a bouquet of beauties, a gorgeous grouping of colours. But Darcy did not take any great pleasure in admiring this delightful tableau. He looked for Nointel, and perceived him chatting in the midst of a little group which comprised the inevitable Lolif. It was no easy task to join him for a quadrille set barred the way. Gaston succeeded, however; and Nointel, on seeing him, hastened to leave the people he was with to take the arm of his friend and conduct him into a corner. "My dear fellow," said the captain, joyfully, "you have done well to come. I have a surprise arranged for you here."

"What surprise?" asked Darcy quickly.

"My dear friend," replied Nointel, laughing, "if I told you now it would no longer be a surprise when the moment arrived for me to explain myself. You will lose nothing by waiting, and to help you in gaining patience, I am going to tell you a multitude of things which will interest you."

"There is but one which interests me."

"It is that very subject that I am about to talk about indirectly. But admit that you are angry with me for not having been to see you for some days."

"Oh, I know that my company isn't lively."

"That's it; you are vexed. I bet that you accuse me of fickleness and even of indifference. Very well. I swear to you that you are wrong. I have thought of nothing but you, that is to say of Mademoiselle Lestérel. And I have done more for her in one week than I should have done in a month if we had worked together."

"What have you done, then?"

"In the first place, I have acquired the certainty that she is innocent; yes! completely innocent. Not merely, it was not she who killed Julia, but it was not she who wrote the compromising letters which she went in search of at the ball."

"She went there, then?"

"Yes, that is a settled fact. But she went there, as we supposed from devotion—a sublime devotion, my dear fellow. The letters were her sister's; to regain them she risked her reputation; and now that she is accused of a crime she did not commit, she prefers to go before the assizes rather than confess the truth. She will allow herself to be condemned rather than betray Madame Crozon's secret. She would have to say but one word to justify herself, but that word would undoubtedly endanger the life of a woman who took the place of a mother to her, and that word she will not utter."

"Say it, then, for her! If you can prove this, what prevents you from saving her? Why do you not hasten to see my uncle? He is coming here. Will you refuse to inform him of what you assert you know?"

"Absolutely. It would be a false step, and false steps are injurious. It might be that he would disapprove of what I am doing to oppose the accusation, and he might politely tell me to remain quiet. I don't wish to be on bad terms with him, and I am anxious to preserve my liberty of action."

"I no longer understand you."

"It isn't necessary that you should understand me," replied Nointel, who was perfectly calm. "You may suspect me of being deficient in zeal, but you certainly cannot suspect my intentions. Very well, let me manœuvre as I think best. I give you my word of honour that, after a very brief delay, I will explain to you all I have done, and I am certain you will approve of it."

"You forget that while you preparing your wise plans, Mademoiselle Lestérel remains in prison."

"I forget nothing, and to prove to you that I think of her position, I can, even now, tell you that her innocence will be demonstrated perhaps within twenty-four hours, and that I shall not be entirely unconnected with the result."

"How will it be demonstrated? Speak!—unless you take a pleasure in torturing me."

"The matter in question was to decide a certain point to which I ventured to attract the attention of Monsieur Roger Darcy, who had not, at first, attached sufficient importance to it."

"What! you have seen my uncle?"

"Not at all. I begged some one to see a witness who had already been heard, and to advise that witness to make another statement, and this time to be more exact. That should have been done yesterday or the day before, and if, as I hope, the evidence was favourable to the suspected party, she is saved. The *alibi* is established."

Darcy's heart-throbs almost choked him. He recalled his uncle's letter, and he asked himself if this was not the good news which Madame Cambry was to announce to him; but he still had some rancour against the captain, and thought it right to imitate him in the undue discretion with which he reproached him. So instead of confiding to him his hopes, he merely replied: "That would be too good. I have no such expectations."

"One must never fix expectations on anything," continued Nointel, quietly; "and if we fail in this, I shall execute my plan, which is simple and practicable. My plan, as you know, consists in convicting Madame de Barancos of having assassinated Julia. If she is guilty, Mademoiselle Lestérel is not. That's clear, and that is better than all the *alibis* in the world. Now, I hold Simancas and Saint-Galmier. I know the rascalities of these two rogues, who wished to prevent my entrance here. Here I am, as you see, and here I shall remain till I possess her secret. The transatlantic bandits have hauled down their flag, and I shall have them thrown outside whenever it pleases me. I tolerate their presence temporarily for reasons of my own, but it isn't impossible that this very night, I shall force a confession from Madame de Barancos. It was for that reason I begged you to come."

"Always enigmas," murmured Gaston.

"Enigmas of which you shall have the solution, if you are patient enough not to retire before the cotillion."

"I understand you less and less."

"All the more reason why you should remain. I can understand that you have no taste for dancing, but the quadrille isn't obligatory, and to pass the time, you will have your uncle's conversation, which cannot fail to be interesting. Now you will excuse me for leaving you. Madame de Barancos will soon have finished receiving her guests, and, she won't care to give up her share of the dancing. She is crazy over waltzing. She would, perhaps, prefer a *cachucha*; but castanettes are awkward to carry, and she isn't sufficiently Spanish to publicly execute a national step. She makes up for it by waltzing, and I propose waltzing with her as much as I can, not to mention sharing the cotillion which is promised me. It is during the cotillion that I shall strike the decisive blow, and, if you believe in me, you will wait till this final dance is over."

"I make no promise."

"So be it! but you will remain, I'm sure of it, for I promise to go off with you in your brougham, and to render you an exact and circumstantial account of my operations. No more enigmas, no more mysteries; you shall know everything. Is it understood?"

"Yes, but——"

"That suffices me, and I will go and attend to my affairs. If Saint-Galmier and Simancas approach you, don't stand on politeness, but cut them unmercifully."

"You have no need to give me that recommendation. Those two scoundrels inspire me with aversion."

"Ah! there is also Prébord, who has succeeded in introducing himself here, in spite of the affront that Madame de Barancos offered him the other day in the Champs-Élysées. I think he will pass you by softly, still avoid him. The time hasn't yet arrived to seek a quarrel with him. And now, my dear fellow, I'm off."

So saying, the captain left his friend to his reflections, and was soon lost in the multitude which crowded the large room.

The orchestra had stopped playing ; the quadrille was ended, and the gentlemen were reconducting their partners to their seats. Gaston looked for his uncle, but it was only after some time that he finally discovered him standing in front of Madame Cambry, who was surrounded by admirers. Her beauty attracted the gentlemen present just as a light attracts moths. A circle had been formed in front of her chair ; she had as much as she could do to take note of all the waltzes solicited by her younger friends, and to reply to the compliments of those who were further advanced in years, and who discreetly congratulated her upon her approaching marriage. M. Roger Darcy received numerous hand-shakes, and extricated himself like a man of wit from a position which was somewhat delicate at his age ; the position of an accepted, acknowledged suitor, escorting the young woman he intends to marry.

Gaston did not care to mingle with these more or less sincere courtiers, he had something besides insipidities to say to the charming widow, and so he waited for the swarm of gallants to scatter before approaching her ; and meantime he looked at her from a distance in the hope of being able to read on her sweet face the news which she had to announce to him. But he read nothing there. A woman at a ball hides her sorrows under her smiles ; cheeks made pale with grief take colour ; eyes which have wept sparkle. It is impossible to divine if her heart is in the *fête*, or if the joy she manifests is only a blind. Gaston saw but one thing, that Madame Cambry was charming. She was attired in black satin. Her dress, cut very tight at the hips, showed her supple, round figure to admirable advantage. No white, no coloured trimmings on this deep black. Nothing but some flowers sparsely scattered, huge pansies of a violet blue, which the florist who had produced them called *Dagmar-Eyes*, because they recalled the extraordinary shade of the eyes of an adorable princess. Indeed Madame Cambry's attire was mourning, the mourning costume for a ball. She had put on no diamonds, although she had some superb ones, family jewels which had been worn by her ancestors. The only ornament she wore was hidden beneath a bouquet of jasmine, which it fastened to her bosom near the shoulder ; it was a little serpent in rubies, merely the eyes of which could be seen. "She loves Berthe ; she defends her," thought Gaston. "How many women in her place would have disowned the poor unjustly accused orphan. And who knows but what from having pleaded her cause with my uncle, she has succeeded in saving her ?" He was anxious to approach her, and cursed the eager throng who overwhelmed her with compliments, and probably with invitations to dance. "She is no doubt already engaged for the whole night," he thought, "and God knows when I shall be able to talk to her. My uncle is there, but I should prefer not to address myself to him."

Finally, there was a break in the circle. The preludes of the orchestra were heard and the tuning of instruments recalled the cavaliers, who had been scattered through the room to a sense of duty. They hurried off to the partners of their choice, and Gaston was able to approach Madame Cambry. M. Roger Darcy had just been accosted by one of his magistrate friends, and did not see his nephew. But the widow perceived him at the first step he took towards her, and her face changed in expression. She summoned him by a sign, although she was still besieged by Lieutenant Tréville, who insisted on obtaining a waltz, even though it were the thirteenth. And Gaston did not require to be begged to go and curtail the gallant importunities of this dashing hussar. "I was looking

for you," said Madame Cambry, as she offered him the tips of her tapering fingers.

Tréville understood that he was one too many, and beat a retreat, after having bowed to the widow with an expressive smile, and greeted his fellow-clubman with a friendly good evening.

"On my side I was looking for you, madame," murmured Gaston, "and I beg of you to excuse me for having so long delayed presenting myself. Judge of my impatience. You were so surrounded that I could not get near, and yet I only came for you——"

"For her and for me, was it not? I regret not having met you sooner. I shouldn't have engaged myself, and now I shall be obliged to leave you when we have so much to say to each other. But I have kept a quadrille for you. Don't go far away."

"I certainly won't, and I cannot thank you too much."

"It is your uncle you must thank. He alone has done everything. But I hear the prelude to a waltz I have promised. I leave you to Monsieur Roger, who will tell you——"

"What I should a hundred times prefer to hear from your lips," interrupted Gaston, moved to the extent of forgetting that it is unseemly to interrupt a woman.

Madame Cambry thereupon leaned forward, and whispered in his ear: "I am very happy. To-morrow Berthe will be restored to us."

"To-morrow," exclaimed Gaston; "did I hear correctly? To-morrow she will be free?"

"The order was signed this morning," murmured Madame Cambry. "Your uncle will tell you the rest. At this moment, you see, I no longer belong to myself."

The favoured waltzer came forward hastily, he was a handsome young deputy, proud of the honour done him by the future Madame Darcy. She took his arm and allowed him to lead her away.

"Free!" muttered Gaston. "Ah! I did not hope for this happiness, and I can scarcely believe it. And one would believe that Madame Cambry almost doubts it. She announced this joyous news to me in almost a sad tone. And yet she said: 'The order is signed!' Ah! I long to question my uncle."

M. Roger was but a few steps away, and he had plainly seen his nephew, but, unfortunately, he was engaged in a most serious conversation with his colleague, and Gaston could not throw himself into a discussion on the position of the magistracy. He had to confine himself to casting supplicating glances upon M. Roger Darcy, who made him a sign to wait, whereupon he took refuge in the embrasure of a window so as to leave the floor free to the whirling evolutions of the waltz.

Twenty couples, led by an excellent orchestra, were revolving over the waxed floor. Some foreign ladies sped by like rushing comets. Prébord accompanied a tall American brunette with fire in her eyes and a jeweller's shop on her shoulders. Little Baron de Sigolène conducted a young Spanish lady as pale as the moon, a sort of second-cousin to the marchioness. Tréville, put down by the handsome widow for a fourteenth mazurka, consoled himself by embracing a Russian lady with green eyes, who leaned upon him with tartar-like nonchalance. And Saint-Galmier, with his forty-odd years, swung round over the floor with the plump patient whom he treated for a nervous affection. The waltz came within the limits of his dietetic treatment.

Retained by her duties as hostess, the Marchioness de Barancos was not waltzing, and Nointel had gone to join her in the first room. Gaston, on his side, had eyes for no one but his uncle, and his emotion was deep when he saw him separate from the magistrate, who had been talking with him, and approach the window. M. Roger Darcy was smiling. That was a good augury. "Well," he said, "you ought to be happy, for I suppose that Madame Cambry has announced the good news to you."

"Yes," replied the nephew, palpitating with mingled hope and disquietude, "Madame Cambry has assured me that to-morrow morning Mademoiselle Lestérel will leave the prison."

"That is perfectly true."

"Ah! you give me back my life. I knew very well that she was not guilty. At last her innocence has manifested itself! This odious accusation has been set at nought—no trace of it will remain, and now——"

"Excuse me! Madame Cambry told you nothing else?"

"No."

"Ah! the most intelligent women are wanting in precision of mind. She might well have completed her news."

"We exchanged but a few words. She had to go and waltz."

"Why, it was your place to open the ball with your future aunt. Lovers don't know what they are about; and I suppose you are still in love?"

"More than ever, and I hope that now you will not disapprove of the resolution I have taken to marry——"

"A woman under suspicion. Why, yes, I disapprove of it strongly. Why would you have me change my mind, since, in reality, the situation has not changed?"

"I don't understand you, uncle. You have just told me that Mademoiselle Lestérel is to be set at liberty——"

"Provisionally. That is the word which Madame Cambry ought to have added. It is true that you—you ought to have divined it."

"Provisionally—how?—what means——"

"On bail, to speak correctly. That astonishes you. You have forgotten the law, then! I somewhat suspected it."

"What! it isn't a discharge which is in question? You don't, then, abandon this affair, when all goes to prove——"

"Please calm yourself, and listen to me. I will explain to you the motives of the decision at which I have arrived, after much hesitation. I have proof that Mademoiselle Lestérel was at the ball at the opera house, that she entered the box occupied by Julia d'Orcival several times. She herself does not deny it. Her obstinate silence, her tears, are equivalent to an avowal. That she did not remain all night at the ball, I admit. It is even pretty certain that she went elsewhere. Where? She refuses to say, and that refusal is infinitely suspicious to me. I say nothing of the Japanese poniard which belongs to her, of the burned letters, of the fragment of paper found in her fireplace. You know all that, and you will admit that it was, and is still, my duty to investigate the affair until it is quite cleared up. But an incident has occurred which you do not know of, and which has somewhat modified the situation. During the night of the ball, between Saturday and Sunday, two police officers who were making their rounds, found a domino and a mask on the Boulevard de la Villette, at the corner of the Rue du Buisson Saint-Louis. These articles were formally recognised by a costumier who had sold them to Made-

moiselle Lestérel. That is another proof that she went to the ball—and elsewhere, as I said to you just now."

"Boulevard de la Villette!" repeated Gaston. "It is very extraordinary."

"Very extraordinary, indeed; but what is no less so, is what I am going to inform you of. The two police officers, whom I had questioned, had deposed, in the first place, that they had found these articles at a late hour in the night, without being more exact; and I had held to this declaration, which agreed exceedingly well with the hypothesis of the accusation. The day before yesterday, however, one of these policemen asked to complete his deposition, and I had him called into my office. He came to tell me that, since his first examination he had recollected that a short time after picking up the domino he had heard one of the church-bells of Belleville strike three o'clock."

"Well?" asked Gaston, who could not divine what his uncle was coming to.

"Well?" replied M. Roger Darcy in an almost jeering manner, "it is to this circumstance that you owe Mademoiselle Lestérel's temporary release. Reflect a little, and you will be of opinion that the crime having been committed at three o'clock by a woman in a domino, this woman could not be the one who threw her domino into the street before three o'clock."

"That is evidence itself, and, in the presence of so conclusive a proof, I am astonished that you have still any doubts, and that you do not definitively release Mademoiselle Lestérel."

"Not as conclusive a proof as you claim. In the first place I am greatly struck by the fact that the witness only recalled this important fact after an interval of five or six days. This tardy return of memory is due to the suggestions of a person not connected with the case."

"It is Nointel who has done this," thought Gaston to himself, "and I accused him of lukewariness—of negligence!"

"I ought to say," continued the magistrate "that I have inquired into the moral character of this police officer, and have learned that his reputation is good. His superiors believe him incapable of trifling with the truth, and of letting himself be won over by a gratuity. He states that it was in talking of the affair with a stranger in a *café* that he remembered this circumstance of the clock striking; it was the clock of the Eglise Saint-Georges, a church recently erected in the Rue de Puebla. This stranger remarked to him, he says, that the magistrate would no doubt wish to be informed of this detail, and made him promise to ask an audience of me."

"Then all explains itself in the most natural way."

"Hem! it is still necessary to find out if this giver of advice is not interested in the question. For instance, if he were a friend of the suspected party, there would be something more to elucidate in that direction. But finally, I accept the fact as established. Unfortunately, this fact is in contradiction with several others, all also averred. So that Mademoiselle Lestérel's innocence may be completely and definitively proved, it will still be necessary to show that she did not change her costume on the way, that she did not enter the opera house twice, that between her two visits she did not make a journey to Belleville, the cause for which remains to be determined, and that while on this journey she did not rid herself of her domino to dress herself in another——"

"But it is abs— no, it is inadmissible."

"You almost spoke impertinently to me, and you forget that Julia's letter made an appointment with Mademoiselle Lestérel for half-past two. It is not at all inadmissible that Mademoiselle Lestérel was prompt to the cime. As to her first appearance in the box at about half-past twelve, that can be explained in more ways than one."

"Other women besides her entered it."

"You imagine so, and that is evidently the course which will be followed by the defence when the affair comes before the assizes."

"Before the assizes! You think then——"

"That the prisoner will be sent before the jury. It is very probable. However, it is not certain. I don't deny *a priori* that another woman, or, if you prefer it, other women were received by Julia between midnight and three o'clock. But up to the present, all seems to prove the contrary. The principal witness on this point is the box-keeper. Now, this woman is half an idiot. She has her head full of ridiculous fancies. She went so far as to pretend that the crime was committed by that Monsieur Lolif whom you know, and who is only an inoffensive simpleton. In brief, I can draw nothing clear from a wild person whom my recorder has the hardest work in the world to follow when she rambles off. In that direction again, obscurity abounds."

"You admit that, and yet you persist in sustaining the accusation," said Gaston bitterly.

"I sustain nothing at all. I am not the public prosecutor. And I have done for the suspected party all I could do—more than I ought to have done perhaps," replied the magistrate severely. "There are doubts, I recognise them, and the fact of the domino having been found before three o'clock constitutes a very remarkable presumption in Mademoiselle Lestérel's favour. I rely on this fact in taking a step which has rarely been taken in a criminal case of this gravity, but which appears to me humane and equitable. I investigate, I don't judge. The jurymen have to judge. It was for that they were invented. But I can, without closing the investigation, spare an interesting young girl some useless severities. So after referring the matter to the proper authority I have signed the order for release on bail. This bail was furnished to-day, and I have no reason to hide from you that it was Madame Cambry who furnished it."

"I had guessed it. She believes her innocent and she is so good."

"To be frank with you, I should have preferred if she had not mixed herself up in this affair, for she will soon be my wife, and it is not customary for parties under suspicion to be bailed by the future wife of the magistrate who has the affair in hand. But she strongly insisted, and then, after all, we are not yet married. She is free as to her actions. Besides, I don't see whom Mademoiselle Lestérel could have applied to for this service."

"To me."

"The inconvenience would have been the same, since you are my nephew. And your intervention might have injured the suspected party. It would have given rise to a number of unfavourable comments. The sister could do nothing without authority from her husband, who is not well disposed towards Mademoiselle Lestérel. I had him called, this husband. He recognised the poniard, but he knows nothing of the affair. His wife, who is ill, was examined at home by commission. Neither did she inform me of anything."

"But—the sequel, uncle? What will be Mademoiselle Lestérel's position after she leaves the prison?"

"Mademoiselle Lestérel will remain at my disposal, and I warn you that she will be the object of a discreet but attentive surveillance."

"At least I may see her?"

"If she consents to it, yes. I ask you, however, to be very reserved in your relations with her. Madame Cambry will also see her, and I have begged of her to be very prudent."

"And how will this sad affair terminate?"

"One of two things will happen: either the investigation which I shall pursue will be followed by no new discovery, and, in that case, when I am of the opinion that nothing more is to be hoped for from it, I shall transmit the papers in the case to the grand jury, who will very probably send the suspected party before the assizes; or, on the contrary, I shall find another culprit—I must have one, for Julie Berthier was killed by a woman."

"By a woman who is here?" exclaimed Gaston.

"How by a woman who is here?" asked M. Roger Darcy, giving his nephew a keen look. "Are you becoming crazy, or are you jesting with me?"

The last strains of the orchestra expired, the waltzers came to a stop, and amid the entangled couples one could see the panting deputy returning with Madame Cambry. At the same moment the marchioness appeared, radiant, at the entrance of the ball-room, and advanced, surrounded by a procession of adorers, in the first rank of whom shone Nointel, proud, smiling, and twirling the points of his moustache. Gaston, who was about to pronounce the name of Madame de Barancos, bethought himself, on perceiving his friend, that the time had not yet come, and that the place was badly chosen for denouncing so great a lady. "I meant to say, who is perhaps here," he murmured, in an embarrassed manner.

His uncle smiled and said to him in a fatherly way: "My dear Gaston, you are really not sufficiently serious, and I very much fear that you won't be of any great help to Mademoiselle Lestérel. You have a host of absurd ideas in your head, I'll bet. You imaginé that Julie Berthier was killed by a lady of society, and that you'll discover her by some wonderful means. You weave a romance instead of following the reality step by step. It is not by running after chimeras that you will demonstrate the innocence of your friend. Yes; I repeat to you that it is barely possible she can be the victim of an error, that another woman entered the box; at all events it is not in this room that you must seek that other woman. The d'Orceival had friends, and rivals. That side of her life has not been sufficiently elucidated; I admit it. The evidence is wanting. Produce it, if you can, but, believe me, don't suspect the marchioness—for it was at the marchioness you were looking just now, when you uttered that absurdity. And now suffer me to leave you to resume my part as a future husband. Didn't Madame Cambry promise you a quadrille? While you are dancing with her you might ask her advice as to the best way of seeing Mademoiselle Lestérel without compromising her. And I hope you will follow her recommendations, for she is a good counsellor."

Gaston was dying with the desire to reply: "Follow her advice yourself, then. If you were to consult her, she would advise you to give an order of discharge." But he knew very well that this tart reply would produce no effect upon his uncle, and so he remained silent and wended his way towards Nointel, whom he longed to join, to confide to him his

disappointment mingled with a little joy. Berthe was about to be free. He was about to see her again. But what was this semblance of happiness compared to the dangers which still menaced her? See her again! And then, after that, lose her for ever? The mere thought of that made him shudder, and he again began to reproach his friend the captain—who was at this moment parading before Madame de Barancos, and wasting his time in preparing snares for her into which she would never fall. He so manœuvred, however, as to follow the superb marchioness from a distance. She advanced, reviewing her guests, and distributing smiles and gracious words. A queen could not have acquitted herself better of this distribution of obligatory courtesies. It was plainly to be seen that she had but lately governed Cuba.

Gaston observed that she was most polite towards Madame Cambry and M. Roger Darcy, although she was but little acquainted with them. She had often met them in society, but it was the first time she had received them at her residence. They avoided grand *fêtes*, and it had required an exceptional circumstance for Madame Cambry to decide to show herself at this cosmopolitan gathering. Her marriage had been decided upon a few days before, however, and she had willingly seized upon this occasion to give a sort of official consecration to a project which was to be realised within a brief delay. Still one would have said that she felt herself somewhat out of place among these bustling foreigners who formed the majority of the marchioness's habitual society. And although the magistrate made a good appearance, he looked a little as though he thought like the Doge of Genoa at Versailles: "What astonishes me the most is to see myself here."

A cloud passed over Madame Cambry's face when Madame de Barancos stopped before her to thank her for having come, and to compliment her in exquisite terms. "One would swear that she suspects that Berthe owes her misfortunes to this woman," thought Gaston Darcy.

But the shadow soon passed away, compliments were returned with delicate courtesy, and for a few moments one was able to enjoy a delightful picture: the two most charming women of the ball, where shone all the marvels of the two worlds, exchanging sweet compliments and standing face to face as though the better to contrast their different styles of beauty; the Spaniard with her golden complexion, her fervid gaze; the Parisian with her sweet and penetrating charm—in truth a ruby and a pearl.

Gaston blessed the pearl as much as he admired her, and Nointel had quite the appearance of adoring the ruby. Nevertheless, as soon as he perceived Darcy, he arranged matters so as to allow the marchioness and her court to pass by, and approached him, saying in a low voice: "Well, have you chatted with your uncle?"

"Yes," replied Gaston, in a melancholy way. "Mademoiselle Lestérel is to be released on bail—a temporary justice."

"Good! my worthy police officer has spoken, then."

"What! you know——"

"It was I who hinted to him to complete his evidence. Will you again say that I neglect your affairs?"

"No—no—and I ask your pardon for my bad humour. You have rendered me an immense service. Only for you she would still be in prison. Who knows, alas! if she will not return there?"

"Never. It is I who answer for it. And what I have already done is a guarantee of what I shall do in the future."

"My uncle has just declared to me that proofs of that kind will not suffice him. His last words were: 'A crime has been committed. It was committed by a woman. I must have a culprit.'"

"He shall be furnished with one," said the captain gaily. "By the way, introduce me to Monsieur Roger Darcy and Madame Cambry. You will never find a better opportunity, and, for the success of my future operations, it is important that I should know them both. Not a word about the affair, that is well understood. After the introduction we will go and take a turn at the buffet. I am dying with thirst. I dined at the club, where they have the fault of making everything so fearfully salt."

"Come," interrupted Gaston. "If we delay, my uncle will be entrapped by a senator, whom I see approaching in that direction, and Madame Cambry will fly off on the arm of a dancer."

"You are right, we must not miss the coach. Let us commence with your uncle."

They were awaited. The magistrate had divined that his nephew was bringing him this friend whom he was somewhat astonished not to know, and the handsome widow had a presentiment that this elegant cavalier who chatted with Gaston Darcy wished to be introduced to her.

The reception by the uncle was cordial. He found something amiable to say about the captain's military career, and graciously reproached Gaston for having so long delayed acquainting him with M. Nointel. Madame Cambry did not show herself less gracious, and as she had eyes which spoke, Nointel understood very well that she had divined in him a defender of her dear Berthe. And thus she did not allow him to take his leave without first making him promise to come to her Saturday receptions, and the captain enthusiastically engaged to show himself there assiduously.

The orchestra, which announced a quadrille, then curtailed the interview, and Nointel hastened to conduct his friend to quieter regions. The buffet was situated at the end of an immense hall, filled with flowers and shrubs, a perfect winter-garden, with walks and thickets among the verdure. People were not lacking, for many American gentlemen were present, and for them the buffet was one of the greatest attractions. But it was not very difficult to avoid them and to chat freely.

"My dear fellow," said the captain, "I have promised you a surprise for the end of the ball. You will have it, for my affairs with the marchioness are progressing marvellously well. I am sure that she will dance the cotillion with me, and that is the great point."

"Will you finally tell me——"

"Nothing, only that I was fortunate enough at the outset to hit upon the compliment which would the best please her. I at once espied the diamond clasps she wears on her shoes—a style she wishes to introduce—and I went into ecstasies over the good taste of this discovery, and, at the same time, over her little feet, which are charming. She was in the seventh heaven. I had touched the sensitive cord—and I have more than one to my bow—she adores waltzing, and has promised me a turn at it without counting the cotillion. Now, in waltzing, I have a way of bending my limbs and multiplying the backward steps—you'll see. When Madame de Barancos has tried it, she will only ask to recommence."

"And what do you expect your seductions to lead to?"

"You ask me that? Why they will lead our marchioness to the point where I wish her to be, to launch my thunderbolt. If she was not moved

by skilful preparations, she would be of sufficient force to retain her self-possession when I suddenly unmask my batteries. But I am not afraid of that. Her heart already beats the charge, and she thinks no more of Julia d'Orceval than of the late marquis her husband."

"You think she loves you?"

"No, not yet. But she has a liking for me, a very strong liking, and she would love me if I wished it. Why not? She loved Golynine very well. But I don't care for it. I am only working for you, and I deserve some merit for my abstemiousness, for she is adorable. I had prejudices against Spanish ladies. I am commencing to like them. This one has an ardour, a frankness of language, an casiness of manner! one would swear that she had never lied in her life, and it is plainly evident that her will knows no obstacle—a peculiarity of character which explains the knife-thrust given to Julia. I only like gentle women, a little given to being slaves—and, my dear fellow, I shouldn't care to play long at the game with this marchioness. I should finish by burning myself like a fool in the fire of her big eyes. And there are already moments when I regret having thrown myself into the assault. I have fears of not returning. But by good luck the engagement will be of short duration. The night will not pass without my knowing what to believe, and if this woman Barancos is guilty, I shan't yet be so smitten as to feel any remorse in sending her where she willingly allowed Mademoiselle Lestérel to go."

"God grant it!" sighed Darcy.

"He will grant it. The means are rough, but the cause is just. Now, let us change the subject. We are approaching the buffet, and I perceive Saint-Galmier besieging some truffled galantine. Where is Simancas, then? Ah! there he is with a Castilian duenna in tow, a duty imposed upon him by the marchioness, no doubt. You will see how I shall treat those two rogues."

The buffet, served by a squad of lackeys, as majestic and solemn as ministers, looked splendid. And the viands solid and light, with which it was laden, had not been brought already prepared from some fashionable caterer's. The old family plate shone on the side-boards, and the arms of Madame de Barancos were visible even on the buckets in which the champagne was iced. "Good evening, captain," said Saint-Galmier obsequiously; "do you wish my seat?"

"Thanks, I wish a seat, but not yours," replied Nointel drily. "And I beg of you not to call me 'your captain.' We never served in the same regiment that I know of."

"Certainly not!" continued the doctor, not in the least disconcerted, "but we both serve the Marchioness de Barancos."

"Not in the same way, doctor. Tell me, how is your alcoholised gentleman of the other day?"

"My gentleman!" repeated the doctor all aghast; "I don't know what you mean."

"What!" continued Nointel with a sneer, "you have already forgotten that amiable patient, the one who talked of taking a long cruise with you and your friend Simancas?"

"Ah! yes, I remember—but I—I have not seen him since."

"Good! You must have given him a prescription which satisfied him. Continue to treat him well, I advise you."

Saint-Galmier glided softly away from the buffet just as Simancas approached it. The illustrious Peruvian general scanned the floor, and

did not show himself at all anxious to enter into conversation with the captain. Perhaps he had overheard fragments of the dialogue, and feared that he might fare badly. Nointel turned his back upon him without bowing, was served to a few glasses of iced Roederer, and walked away with Darcy, who, during this little scene, had not opened his mouth either to drink or to speak. "My dear fellow," said the captain, "you are astonished to see me treat these fellows as I would not treat my lackeys—if I had any lackeys. You think, perhaps, that I should do as well to keep in with them, since I reckon on making use of them in unmasking Madame de Barancos. Well, you are mistaken. I can treat them as I please, for it only depends on me to send them away as convicts. They know it, and they have resigned themselves to submit to all the humiliations I choose to inflict on them."

"Convicts!" repeated Gaston. "Have you discovered that they were mixed up in the crime at the opera house—that they were the accomplices of the marchioness?"

"No. If I had discovered that, I should have already denounced them. Unfortunately, I am convinced that they merely witnessed the murder, but had nothing to do with it. The word *witnessed* is even a little too strong. I think they merely recognised the marchioness, and heard her kill Julia. But the rogues have other misdeeds on their consciences. They were in conjunction with the late Golymine, the chiefs of a band of robbers. I have the proof of this, or nearly so. You were not expecting that, eh?"

"It's strange. I remember now that, on the day after Golymine's death, my uncle showed me a police memorandum in which it was said that the Pole had formerly been suspected of directing an association of rascals of some apparent position."

"Did the memorandum indicate the object of this association?"

"As well as I recollect, it had something to do with night attacks in the streets of Paris."

"Attacks executed by subaltern brigands, thanks to the indications given by other parties, eh?"

"Yes, that is it. They waylaid rich people who walked the streets at night with valuables in their pockets."

"Fortunate players leaving a club, for instance. No one was in a better position than Simancas and Saint-Galmier to designate the winners at ours. They were present at all the games without taking part in them, and were always careful to go off a little before the close. Why, my dear fellow, you have just elucidated the only point of which I was not yet sure—the reason why they employed the vagabond whom I surprised the other day at Saint-Galmier's, claiming his pay and threatening to compel the doctor and the general to make a voyage to Nounea with him. I have it now, it was that vagabond who, a month ago, rifled young Charnas, who had seventeen thousand francs, won at baccarat, about him."

"And who also robbed me one night of twelve one-thousand franc notes, which I had in my pocket book."

"Really! You never told me of that."

"For the reason that there was nothing about it to brag of. I allowed myself to be rifled so stupidly. The man sprang at my throat at the corner of the Rue du Colysée, and almost strangled me before I had time to act on the defensive."

"Would you recognise him again if he were pointed out to you?"

"Well, no. I had hardly time to get a glimpse of him. I at once lost my breath, and when I recovered myself he had run off. But I remember a somewhat significant circumstance, Simancas had seen me win that money. He left the club at the same time as myself, and after addressing me numerous questions, tending, I think, to assure himself that I was not armed, he went off in a carriage in the direction of the Madeleine."

"And you were attacked in the Rue du Colysée? His hired rifle awaited him somewhere. He no doubt joined him and gave him his instructions, describing your person to him. That's clear; and, the case being successful, your testimony will be exceedingly useful to us. Could you fix the date?"

"Oh, perfectly. It was on the night that I met Mademoiselle Lestérel at the entrance of the Rue Royale. I had just left her when I was attacked."

"The night on which Golyminé hanged himself, then?"

"Yes, I had just broken off with Julia when I entered the club."

"Very good. So my rogues gave up their nocturnal operations as soon as they thought they had an affair in hand which would be more productive and safer—the working of the marchioness; and, thereupon, they dismissed their operator, who isn't satisfied. I will find him when it is necessary. Decidedly Simancas and Saint-Galmier are in my power, feet and wrists bound."

"Why don't you oblige them, then, to denounce the marchioness?"

"It is the only thing I should not obtain from them just now. Understand that if they denounced the marchioness they would kill their hen with the golden eggs. Besides, the marchioness must know a deal about them, and might very well denounce them in her turn. Later on, however, when I shall have brought Madame de Barancos to confess—when she can no longer be of any use to them—they will no longer have a motive for refusing to testify against her. It is then that I shall force them to speak, for I shall go and find your uncle. I shall tell him all. I shall empty my bag, and put matters in his hands."

"Brought the marchioness to confess! You flatter yourself that you will succeed in that?"

"Indeed, yes. It will be less difficult than you think. But don't ask more ample explanations of me just now. I promise you, once more, that you shall soon have them. Allow me till after the cotillion."

"Always that cotillion," murmured Darcy. "Well, so be it! I will wait, and I will now leave you, for Madame Canbry has promised me a quadrille, and I don't wish to lose this opportunity of learning what she expects to do when Mademoiselle Lestérel is set free. Will she receive her as in the past? I doubt it!"

"I also doubt it. Your uncle has a word to say in the matter, and he will probably be of opinion that the future Madame Darcy should not live on terms of intimacy with a person whom he persists in believing guilty, since he will not give an order for her discharge."

"That is true, but he confesses that he has doubts. He even goes so far as to admit that several women may have entered the box."

"Oh! oh! that is a great point. He is slowly coming over to our side."

"And, on this matter, he complains of not being able to draw anything from Madame Majoré, a simpleton, he says, who wanders off instead of replying to questions."

"The fact is that she isn't always very lucid. And one of these evenings I shall have to go and make a trip to the ballet green-room, for we shall need her again. However, by-bye, for the present. I mean to return to the marchioness. I intend to constitute myself the satellite of that bright particular star till daybreak."

Their chat had brought them back to the entrance of the ball-room. They separated on the threshold, Nointel to approach Madame de Barancos, whom he had just perceived giving an order to her major-domo, and Gaston to glide in the direction of Madame Cambry.

He did well, for the charming widow beckoned to him with a sign of the head and a smile: "I have no engagement this time," she said to him; "I had so arranged it as not to have any. You must be my cavalier." And as he launched out into thanksgivings: "Don't thank me," she continued; "it is a sacrifice I impose on you in obliging you to dance, while our friend still suffers all the anguish of incertitude. And I myself only came to please Monsieur Roger Darcy. But Berthe will forgive us for taking part in a quadrille, since we shall only talk about her."

"Madenoiselle Lestérel will bless you, madame; and as for me, I wish I could prove to you all my gratitude," exclaimed Gaston.

"Prove it then, in the first place, by finding a *vis-à-vis*," said the widow, gaily, "for I am sure that you have neglected to take that indispensable precaution."

Gaston, in fact, had not thought of it; and he would have remained in somewhat ridiculous embarrassment if he had not espied the captain, who, with Madame de Barancos on his arm, was advancing towards him, evidently with the intention of offering just what he was in search of.

"How gracious of you, madame, to come to our succour," said the marchioness to Madame Cambry. "Monsieur Nointel has taken me in charge, and I am neglecting all my duties as a hostess to make myself agreeable to him. The quadrille ought to be prohibited to me so long as forgotten ones remain in their seats; but I could not resist, and I don't regret my weakness, since I am to have the pleasure of dancing opposite the lady whom I should have chosen out of all, if I had the right to choose."

Madame Cambry replied in the language which women of real society talk so well, even when they don't think a word of what they say, and the two couples then took their places. Gaston was moved, or rather agitated. The proximity of Madame de Barancos embarrassed and troubled him. He admired the self-possession of his friend who appeared to be in raptures at dancing with a woman so strongly suspected of having killed Julia d'Orcival, and he thought that she would interfere with his plans for a confidential chat with his future aunt.

Madame Cambry did not share this feeling, for she said, at once: "Madame de Barancos is really charming. I had been told so much that was bad of her that I hesitated about accepting her invitation. I find it true once more that one is very wrong in accepting the rumours which circulate in society. She passes for being eccentric, because she isn't vulgar; and for being coquettish, because she is frank. I am sure that your friend, Monsieur Nointel, pleases her, and I like her for not hiding the preference she accords him over so many coxcombs and ambitious men who court her from vanity or for her fortune."

"I don't know if he pleases her," murmured Gaston; "but I don't believe that she pleases him."

"Really, that is a pity. Monsieur Nointel is exceedingly nice, and

by marrying her, he would make a magnificent match. But let us speak of your marriage; what did your uncle say to you while I was waltzing?"

Gaston had not time to reply. The orchestra gave the signal, and the lover was obliged, whether or not, to execute the first figure of the quadrille. On making an evolution round his partner, he perceived that the marchioness was talking to the captain about him, and perhaps also about Madame Cambry, for she looked at them a great deal, and smiled as she did so. Her smile was a kind one, and, of course, Nointel said nothing bad of his friend, and yet Darcy felt almost hurt at being the subject of their conversation. And so, to drive away this impression, he hastened, at the first quiet moment, to reply to Berthe's protectress: "My uncle, no doubt, thought he was going to give me good news, but he wounded me to the heart. I had hoped that he had given up this unjust accusation, and he persists in it. Mademoiselle Lestérol has been set at liberty out of reasons of humanity, and not because her innocence has been recognised. What is necessary for it to be recognised!"

"It will be recognised; don't doubt it. Monsieur Roger is a magistrate before everything else: he fears to act without sufficient reason; but a conviction has commenced to enter his mind; it will do so thoroughly—I will help it—and that accomplished, he will abandon the affair."

"Not before having found the woman who committed the crime. He must have a culprit."

"He said that to you?"

"Those are his very words."

"But this woman; he will never find her—she was able to escape from the ball—she will know how to hide herself—and it would be iniquitous to detain an innocent young girl, so that a courtesan's death might be avenged."

"Forgive me!" continued Madame Cambry, who recalled too late that Gaston had been Julia d'Orival's lover, and that this epithet applied to his former mistress would seem severe to him; "I mean to say that Berthe's liberty and honour cannot depend on the result of investigations undertaken for the discovery of the real culprit."

The second figure of the quadrille commenced, and Darcy had to perform his part in it, instead of continuing the conversation. He resigned himself to the duty, and again looked at the marchioness and the captain. They were no longer laughing. They were chatting in a low voice, and occasionally exchanged rapid glances. Nointel was evidently making progress in Madame de Barancos' favour. And Darcy asked himself how his friend could, without ceasing to be a man of honour, deliver up to justice a woman whom he was trying to induce to love him. "It would be base, he would never stoop to so mean an action," he thought. "I am mad to rely on him. And who knows if he will not allow himself to be caught in his own snare, if he will not become smitten with this Spanish beauty, whom he is trying to allure?"

The evolutions of the dance ceased, and Madame Cambry continued in an excited tone: "Liberty isn't granted to an accused party to be snatched away again. Monsieur Roger Darcy is humane as well as just; he would not have the cruelty to withdraw what he had given. If he hadn't thought that Berthe's innocence would finally be demonstrated, he would never have opened the prison doors to the poor child."

"I should like to share your hopes, madame," muttered Gaston; "but the language used to me by my uncle was so plain——"

"So you count my influence for nothing, then?" asked the charming widow, gently. "Do you think I had nothing to do with the measure which has been taken?"

"Oh! I know how good you are, I know that you are an angel, that——"

"No, I am only a woman, but I believe that Monsieur Darcy has great esteem for me; I even flatter myself that I inspire him with a deeper sentiment, and I reciprocate all the esteem and all the affection he bears me. It would be too painful if he refused me the first favour I asked of him, and he would not cause me such sorrow. Besides, it isn't a favour that I ask; it is justice. Berthe is not guilty; I am ready to swear it before God." And as Gaston, who knew his uncle's character, did not appear convinced, Madame Cambry added, smiling: "And then I shall, if necessary, employ great measures. I shall declare to Monsieur Roger that I will never be his wife as long as he has not signed the order of discharge and completely abandoned this hopeless affair. And he will abandon it, for he would lose his peace and his reputation as a magistrate in its pursuit. You will marry Berthe, and on that day I hope you will pardon me for becoming—your aunt."

The insupportable orchestra announced the third figure, and it was necessary to start off again. This time the movement of the quadrille brought Gaston very near the marchioness; he was even obliged to give her his hand, and he took no pleasure in doing so. It also happened that he overheard these words uttered by Nointel: "Do you really believe, madame, that the general conspired in Peru?" And the reply of Madame Barancos: "I don't know his history, and have no desire to know it."

Then the chain was broken; Gaston returned to his place and to his conversation with Madame Cambry. "If you knew how happy I was to learn that you are to be married to my uncle," he said to her. "You do me, I hope, the honour to believe that monetary considerations affect me little. I never for a single moment dreamt of inheriting a fortune which ought not to come to me, and which I can do without. So I lose nothing by this marriage, and I gain a friend—permit me to make use of that word—a friend who will plead the cause of my wife with her husband."

"And who will gain it, I swear to you. You overwhelm me with joy by telling me that you have not changed your ideas. I knew well enough that you had a noble heart, but prejudices have so much power that I trembled for Berthe's happiness."

"Her happiness! you believe, then, that she loves me?"

"If she loves you! Do you doubt it? Have you never noticed the agitation your presence caused her? I had divined that she loved you long before that last sad evening, when you accompanied her on the piano while she sang Martini's air—'Sorrows of love——'."

"'Last all the life,'" sighed Darcy. "The words are right."

"No, they are wrong. Your sorrows are cruel, but they will end. You will be happy, if you know how to be so. Dare I ask you how you mean to live after your marriage?"

"Are you certain that this marriage will take place? During that evening, the sad memory of which you have just recalled to me, Made-moiselle Lestérel declared that she would never consent to it."

"Then she still mistrusted the sincerity of your sentiments. She is proud and suspicious, because she has suffered, because she is poor. She feared having inspired only a fancy in you; she did not flatter herself with

being loved as she would liked to be loved, as she deserves to be. And the deeper that the passion you inspired in her became, the more she tried to hide it. Now the trial has been made. The man who is sufficiently courageous to defend a young girl in misfortune, is worthy of marrying the one he saves. You will surely marry Berthe, and if I asked you just now what you would do after your marriage, it was because you will—at all events at the outset—have the world's opinion against you. You will need support; very well, my house will be open to you; I was anxious to tell you so."

"What! my uncle will consent——"

"That is another condition I shall impose upon him before pronouncing the *yes* which will bind me for ever. And I will answer for it that it will be accepted. We shall receive our nephew and our niece. Monsieur Roger Darcy has too exalted a mind to allow himself to be influenced by the opinions of fools. I shall throw our house open to you. You and Berthe will do the rest."

"Oh, madame, how have we deserved so generous a protection?"

"You wish to know?" asked Madame Cambry. "Very well, you owe it to the violence, to the sincerity of the love which inflames you both. This love has moved me, for I have seen it born and grow; for, I know that each of you would sacrifice everything else to it. We women read hearts. Berthe loves you to the death—Ah! one loves thus but once in one's life. Ah, me!" continued Madame Cambry. "Look there!—our partners opposite have followed the orchestra, and we, we are twenty measures behind. Your friend is making desperate signs to you. Let us hurry and catch up with them. If we miss the figure, the marchioness will imagine that you are making love to your aunt."

Gaston troubled himself very little about what the marchioness thought of his absent-mindedness, but he yielded to Madame Cambry's request, although the conversation interested him very much, and all this dance manoeuvring irritated him considerably. It came to an end after the prescribed marches and countermarches; and as the quadrille was drawing to a close, Darcy profited by the last intermission to inform himself more positively as to Madame Cambry's intentions. "And so," he said, "to-morrow Mademoiselle Lestérel will be free—she will no doubt return to her apartments in the Rue de Ponthieu."

"Yes; I wished to lodge her temporarily with me. But your uncle begged me not to do so, and, after reflection, I found he was right. I shall see Berthe at her rooms, then; I shall see her every day, and I shall advise her to receive you."

"I did not dare to ask it of you—and I don't know if she will consent."

"You misjudge her. She will perfectly understand that the situation is changed; still, perhaps, she will beg me to be present at your interviews."

"Ah! madame, what a life she will have to lead. My uncle has told you that she will be subject to an incessant surveillance?"

"Yes, but this surveillance will be discreet, and Berthe doesn't fear it. She will, I suppose, only go out to see her sister. And then, I have a plan which I am going to confide to you. You know that if Monsieur Roger Darcy doesn't abandon the accusation—it is especially because our friend refuses to explain the employment of her time during the night of the ball at the opera house. I distinctly realise the very honourable motive of her obstinate silence, and I will lead her to confess it. I shall

certainly obtain from her a statement which she would never consent to make to an investigating magistrate ; and when she has told me all, I will act for the best. Perhaps I shall persuade her to allow me to repeat part of her story to Monsieur Roger Darcy. Perhaps I shall succeed in justifying her without compromising any one."

"May blessings attend you, madame," said Gaston, "for only you can save her, and you will save her. I'm sure of it."

The orchestra drowned his voice in the call to the promenade, which did not last long, and soon a final chord invited the gentlemen to conduct their partners to their seats.

"I will write and tell you to-morrow at what time you can present yourself at the Rue de Ponthieu," murmured Madame Cambry, as she again took Gaston's arm. "We shall probably not see each other again this evening, for I am very much engaged, and I propose leaving long before the cotillion. Till to-morrow, then, and rely on me."

As Darcy bowed to take his leave of the beautiful and compassionate widow, he had tears in his eyes, and he thanked her with a look of gratitude which said more than words. The supply of hope he carried away with him would help him to have patience till the end of the ball, but he longed to be alone with his thoughts. By dancing this quadrille he had just acquitted himself of the debt which is tacitly contracted by every young man who accepts an invitation to a ball. He now had the right to exempt himself from service and fly the company of the indifferent and the importunate, by ensconcing himself in some well-chosen corner. He did not even care to join the captain who as yet had nothing new to apprise him of, and who, besides, was no doubt fully engaged. A clump of flowers and shrubs placed at the entrance to the hall leading to the buffet offered him a convenient retreat. He established himself there, and did not leave it. From this refuge he saw all that took place in the immense dancing hall ; and if his mind had been at ease, he might have entertained himself by watching the changing tableau of the ball. Waltzes followed mazurkas, and now and then came quadrilles. As for the waltzes Madame de Barancos did not miss one of them. Darcy did not lose her from sight, and he also followed the manœuvres of Nointel, who kept a close hold on her. At one moment an agreeable spectacle met Gaston's eyes : the captain carrying of the marchioness by main force, and, Prébord trying to follow them and shouting : "It was my waltz !" He also saw Madame Cambry go off, as she had announced, taking the arm of the magistrate, who, certainly, at that moment, was not in the least thinking of the investigation. He saw gourmands slyly making their way towards the room where the supper was laid on little tables of six covers, placed amid bushes of camellias. He saw the crowd thinning little by little ; the dancing circle enlarge. He saw complexions become swarthy ; and flowers wither on panting shoulders.

The time was approaching for the marchioness to give the signal for the cotillion—the dance with which all grand Parisian balls invariably close. Significant preparations were already being made. The gilded chairs were being put together in pairs. Some zealous guests disappeared at a sign from the hostess and returned burdened with odd accessories. Each cavalier set out in search of the amiable lady who had consented to unite her fate with his for an hour or two. In the middle of the room stood Madame de Barancos giving orders to aides-de-camp who multiplied at her pleasure.

Darcy had sufficient acquaintance with social amusements to understand the preparatory arrangements for this complicated exercise. He saw that Prébord had been promoted to the important rank of conductor, and that the marchioness had selected Nointel as her appointed partner for the whole cotillion.

"What is he going to do?" said Darcy to himself on observing his friend conduct the marchioness to an isolated settle intentionally chosen some distance from the orchestra, which would have interfered with their chatting. "What is this great blow which he is going to strike, and how will he manage to confound Madame de Barancos? I rely but little upon it; I place much more reliance on Madame Cambry's promises. Still, I should like very much to know at what moment and in what figure he will introduce his effect."

It was not easy to guess, for the cotillion consists of the most varied episodes, and the ingenious person who invented it was pleased to leave great latitude to the conductors—in which he gave proof of genius, for no dance regulated in advance can, like this one, satisfy all tastes. The cotillion serves to compute the beauty as well as the fortune of marriageable young ladies; one has only to count the turns of waltzing asked of a young belle in this dancing test to know her worth. It also procures long and convenient *tête-à-têtes*, and it is certain that at three o'clock in the morning, a woman sometimes listens quietly enough to what no one would dare to say to her at three o'clock in the afternoon. And then, the cotillion helps those who lead it with ability to push their way in the world. A good leader is a rare bird, envied by his compeers, and the recipient of numerous emoluments. It is true that he earns them, for he has to watch over everything, evince imagination, quick-sightedness, and tact, without speaking of his endurance, which should be inexhaustible.

Prébord was a born cotillion leader, and it was to his well-known talents that he was indebted for having been designated by Madame de Barancos, who, in point of fact, did not like him. And, as he always aimed at some conquest, he had so arranged it as to be accompanied—in the capacity of conductress—by a Yankee girl, whose father had accumulated a million of dollars in selling salt pork. Other people known to Gaston Darcy, figured among the couples which were about to execute sundry evolutions under the direction of the dark Don Juan. Tréville was there, with Sigolène, and Verpel, and Lolif—in fact, all the young men of the club. Saint-Galmier, although he was passionately fond of the dance, had prudently abstained. He feared Nointel's cutting flings; while, as for Simancas, his grandeur held him aloof. One does not join in a cotillion after being a Peruvian general.

The marchioness was radiant. Relieved of her duties as a hostess, she now thought only of pleasure. A second lieutenant could not be gayer when he assumes undress after a week's duty. She was at last about to amuse herself as a school-girl does at the first ball to which she is taken after leaving the convent, and even much more, for a school-girl thinks herself obliged to cast down her eyes and to reply merely yes and no to her partner, while he talks to her of the heat and the slippery floor; whereas Madame de Barancos looked boldly at the captain, and chatted with him about everything and something else besides. She passed from sarcasm to sentiment, from sweet melancholy to exuberant gaiety, from remarks on the toilets around her to passionate love talk. Her conversation bounded and rebounded like an Andalusian dancing the *bolero*. "And

Nointel, enraptured, replied to her with perfect readiness. He relied a great deal on the chances of the conversation to accomplish his end. "Why has Miss Anna Smithson, our conductress, arrayed herself in a dress decorated with peacock's feathers?" said the marchioness, laughing behind her fan. "Don't you think the peacock a stupid bird?"

"It is, perhaps, an allusion to her partner, Prébord. See how he spins around. That Californian belle has beautiful eyes!"

"The beautiful eyes of her casket. She will have five millions, and will treat her husband like a negro. I shall have to amuse myself by making her marry this Prébord. He has long wearied me with his homage. This will be my revenge."

"A revenge for which he will thank you."

"Yes, he must be on his knees before money. What a misfortune for a woman to be rich!"

"When she is plain; but when she is beautiful—like you——"

"She suffers still more, for she never knows whether she is loved for herself. She suspects all her lovers. At least, the plain woman is positive."

"Then you would like to be poor?"

"If I were sure of being loved, yes—a hundred times yes. Come! Would you like to know what I dream of?"

The conductress gave the signal by clapping her hands—a custom of the harem transplanted into Parisian society—and Nointel was not informed in regard to the marchioness's dream, for Prébord came in search of her for the first figure, which had been chosen expressly to bring forward the queen of the evening. This figure was classical, and had no doubt been executed in the Courts of Love in the grand old times of chivalry. The lady is seated in the midst of the assemblage, her foot placed upon a silken cushion; the gentlemen, coming each in turn, bend their knees before her, until she designates the favoured one by advancing the cushion. When the foot is pretty, it makes an irresistible effect; and Madame de Barancos' foot was adorable. Nointel passed among the first, and was not chosen. To have been chosen at the first test would have been too significant. The marchioness pushed the cushion towards little Baron de Sigolène, who had the much envied honour of waltzing round the room with her. The attentive Prébord at once ordered another figure, which gave Madame de Barancos her liberty once more. He this time designated a Russian lady, with eyes as changeful as the sea, and brought to her Tréville and Verpel, so that she might impose the name of some animal on each of them. "The Muscovite belle, who had a weakness for the fauna of her own country, called Tréville, Elk, and Verpel, Blue Fox, and then brought them before the American lady with the peacock dress, and begged her to make her choice. Miss Anna Smithson, having some taste for handsome furs, chose the Blue Fox, and was obliged to waltz with Verpel, who was very distasteful to her. "She would like the other much better," said Madame de Barancos to Nointel, when they found themselves seated side by side. "So much the worse for her. Why didn't she divine that that handsome officer was the elk? As for me, if I was anxious to confide my form to the arms of one of the gentlemen presented to me, I am sure I should divine how they had been named."

"Have you the gift of second sight?" asked the captain, laughing. "If you had I should fly, for you would read my thoughts, and after reading them you would for ever close your door to me."

"You detest me, then? What does it matter? I should forgive you if you hated me. Everybody can't hate. Hatred is a passion, and it is only the strong who have passions."

"But if you discovered in the depths, in the very depths of my heart, the sentiment which is the opposite of hatred?"

"The only sentiment I should not forgive in you is indifference. Execrated or adored, I admit no middle ground between those extremes."

"Neither do I; and between the two my choice is made," said Nointel, looking at Madame de Baranco's with his large clear eyes.

She did not lower her own, but said to him, without blushing: "Then you adore me?"

"What must I do to prove it to you?"

"Guess," replied the marchioness, laughing nervously. "The cotillion was invented for guessing. Listen to Monsieur Prébord, who having conducted two women to that fair young man, says to him: 'Rose or mignonette, which do you prefer?' The beau chooses the mignonette—a colourless flower."

"Not so colourless as himself," murmured the captain, who did not yet wish to make a decisive declaration.

He feared being interrupted by an order from the conductress, calling upon him to execute some figure or another, and he suspected that Madame de Baranco's had cut him short after his imprudent remark, because she did not care any more than he did to mix up love with the cotillion. "The gentleman who likes mignonette belongs to your club, does he not?" she resumed, to bring the conversation back to a temperate scale. "I seem to remember that he was formerly introduced to me by Monsieur Prébord."

"No doubt. There are elective affinities between them. Did you know that this Lolif—his name is Lolif—has recently acquired a sort of celebrity? All the newspapers have quoted his name."

"In connection with what?" asked the marchioness, glancing at the reporter by inclination.

"It was he who the other night at the ball at the opera house——"

"Well?"

"It was he who discovered the murdered body of Julia d'Orceval in one of the boxes."

The captain had prolonged his sentence expressly so that it might the better carry, and he did not fail in his effect. Madame de Baranco's became pale and began to fan herself spasmodically. "Ah, really!" she said. "But why do you look at my fan so attentively? It did not come from Japan, I swear to you."

"What! you remember the circumstances of that strange crime!"

"Yes. I am interested in the young girl who has been arrested. Do you know what has happened to her?"

"I was told this evening that she was to be liberated for want of sufficient proof."

"I am delighted to learn that, for I cannot believe that she is guilty. There is a mystery in the matter which will never be cleared up."

"Oh! in France justice clears up everything. Monsieur Roger Darcy, who has just left, is doing everything to discover the truth. You know that he is charged with the affair?"

"No, I was not aware of it. He is then on the track of—of the woman—for it was a woman, it seems."

"Yes; only there were several who visited Julia's box."

"Ah! the authorities are sure of that?"

"Quite sure. And these women are being sought for. They will be found, without doubt. As for me, I bet that the crime was committed by a woman of the upper classes. A fast woman would never have had the courage to strike. Those young ladies have no violent passions. Their jealousies and fits of anger never extend to murder. It is only great ladies who love energetically enough to assassinate a rival."

"You are lugubrious. Let us talk of something else. Here comes our conductor with a past-board head for me. They are about to execute the figure of the *grotesques*. It is a foolish frolic, but I will take part in it to enjoy the pleasure of dressing your Monsieur Lolif's head."

"Yes," thought Nointel, as he followed Madame de Barancos with his eyes, for she had gone and taken her place in the midst of the circle; "yes, it will be very gay, but the cotillion will finish badly for you, marchioness. I was still somewhat in doubt. Now I feel certain. She is very able, but she betrayed herself when I told her that the examining magistrate was seeking for the culprit in the swell drawing-rooms of Paris. It only remains for me to apply the decisive test, and I see perfectly how it will turn out. The lady will be overwhelmed. If she should faint, that would upset my plans a little. But no, she has a devilish control over herself; she will receive the blow without weakening. And then we shall have an explanation—a stormy one. I shall make my conditions—she will accept them. Come! I also shall need energy, for she pleases me enormously. But it must be. It is a pity. What an adorable woman she is!"

The figure finished amid the laughter which greeted the ridiculous masquerades imposed by the ladies upon their unfortunate partners. Prébord had had to waltz three times round the room decorated with a colossal nose, and Lolif smothered under the head of an ass. Nointel alone was spared, and the marchioness having quite recovered from her temporary emotion, resumed her seat beside him. He was careful not to resume the conversation at the point where it had broken off, for he was anxious not to alarm Madame de Barancos further. And, as she was no more inclined than himself to talk concerning the crime of the opera house, she commenced to tell him about a surprise she reserved for her guests.

The figure of the hat which was now to be executed, may be briefly described. In the first place, the ladies deposit an object belonging to themselves—a fan or handkerchief is habitually used—in some gentleman's hat. Each gentleman draws one object by chance, and waltzes with its owner. This was duly executed. Then came the inversion. The gentlemen are required to distribute feminine baubles to the ladies, and ordinarily these small presents, furnished by the hostess, do not enrich the recipients. But the marchioness did not resort to half measures, she followed a fashion which had made its appearance that winter in the high society of Paris. The baubles were real and beautiful jewels,—rings, bracelets, breastpins, and the like.

Nointel had been notified of this, and it was during this princely diversion that he meant to produce his own surprise. While Madame de Barancos went to meet her major-domo, who was bringing a hat full of jewellery, the captain slyly drew from his pocket the sleeve-button confided to him by M. Majoré's worthy wife.

The decisive moment was approaching, and Gaston Darcy, who impatiently awaited it, did not see it coming, although from the spot where he had ensconced himself he very attentively followed all the evolutions of the interminable cotillion. Nointel's gaiety afflicted him, the marchioness's ease of manner irritated him, and, to relieve himself of his agony, he was almost inclined to go off without waiting for his friend. The captain finally perceived him and felt a little pity for him, but he could do nothing to shorten his anguish. He did not even dare to make him a sign for fear of awakening Madame de Barancos' suspicion. She advanced to the centre of the circle formed by the ladies, who were trembling with delight, for they had divined a surprise; she advanced bearing a quantity of jewellery in a hat, which she graciously handed to Miss Anna Smithson, the conductress of the cotillion, who, by the authority conferred upon her by her position, was to successively hand this hat to each of the gentlemen, who in turn were to distribute the trinkets to their chosen partners in the waltz. Madame de Barancos then returned to Nointel, who had not lost sight of her, and who was asking himself how he should proceed to strike his great blow. He was somewhat embarrassed, for he no longer remembered exactly how the figure was executed. "See how the women's eyes glisten," the marchioness said to him in a low voice. "They are all rich, however. Still, I fully believe that if I scattered those gincracks upon the floor, they would fight each other for their possession."

"I will bet that you would willingly grant that diversion, and would derive great enjoyment by witnessing it," replied the captain, laughing.

"Perhaps so."

"Do you know that you have the fancies of a Roman empress?"

"That is because I have lived in a country where I had slaves."

"You have them still."

"You, for instance, of course? What a silly compliment that is to make me. Fortunately, it is only a compliment, and you don't mean a word of it. I should despise you if you were my slave."

"Would you love me if I were your master?"

"Yes," said Madame de Barancos boldly, "for I should never have any but the man I loved for a master. But enough mannerism. Your turn is coming. I really hope that you won't give me one of the jewels I bought for my guests. That would be in very bad taste."

"I will take care not to do that. But I cannot resign myself to losing the opportunity of waltzing with you."

"What will you do to obtain it? No jewel, no waltz; that is the rule of the dance. Just look at Monsieur Prébord. He holds the hat and draws from it a bracelet, which he gallantly clasps on the arm of Miss Anna Smithson, and Miss Anna almost faints while receiving the gift. He will marry her, I will guarantee it. The bracelet is a forerunner of the wedding ring. Imitate that ambitious coxcomb. Place a ring set in brilliants on the finger of one of the heiresses here. See! that fair, pale girl over there—she looks like an ivory tower—and she has a million francs as her dowry."

"I don't want to marry, and I care much more for my turn of the waltz than for a million. Suppose I gave you a jewel which belongs to me. You would then have to waltz with me."

"What folly!" murmured the marchioness, blushing.

"The object is not large. I will present you in the first place with

some bauble taken from the hat. You will put it back, so as not to deprive these ladies of it, and, then, I will offer you mine——”

“A *souvenir* from you—a *souvenir* by compulsion!”

“No, for nothing obliges you to accept it. I only exact my waltz.”

“You have strange ideas.”

“I have a horror of everything that is commonplace. And you?”

Madame de Barancos did not reply. She looked steadily at the captain; and her eyes expressed so much that it was quite useless for her to speak. Meanwhile, the inexhaustible hat passed from hand to hand. Lolif had received it and advanced, his heart in his mouth, towards a plump lady who had charmed him, Saint-Galmier's former partner and patient. With the smiling gravity of a prefect who distributes medals for heroism in saving life, Lolif decorated her with a breastpin set in pearls and rolled with her around the room. The floor shook under the weight of this well-matched couple, and the women laughed behind their fans. No one had as yet addressed the marchioness. Prébord had given his commands to the gentlemen, and the ladies had greatly approved of the disinterestedness of Madame de Barancos, who did not wish to deprive them of a single jewel. For a week past, however, Prébord had not spoken to Nointel, and consequently, the captain was quite at liberty to violate an order he had not officially received.

“Let me see,” he said to himself, “my turn is coming; I must act my part well. How shall I show the accusing button to the marchioness without its being seen by others? I regret not having taken lessons in prestidigitation. They ought to have taught us jugglery at college. Bah! I will get through it, although it may not be very easy. Instead of taking the hat when it is brought to me, I will draw from it, with my right hand, some jewel, which I will offer to Madame de Barancos, and which she will nobly decline. My convicting button is concealed in my left hand. After her refusal, I shall demand my waltz, which will be accorded me—that I am sure of. No one will find fault with this infraction of the rules, and the hat will be carried away amid flattering applause. Then I shall surround the supple form of the divine creole with my right arm making her at the same time partially revolve so as to turn her back to the spectators; and my left hand, in seeking hers, shall open to show her the sleeve-button. She will look at it, for she expects some original gallantry. I warned her expressly. And, besides, if it is necessary, I will exaggerate the movement so that she may closely see the famous initial, the capital B which condemns her. She will recognise it, and become agitated. There will be a moment's cessation of the dance, which I shall profit by to return the object to my pocket. The deuce! I have no desire to leave it with her; in that case I couldn't send it to the examining magistrate. I should then have merely the testimony of Madame Majoré, a testimony which lacks weight. The marchioness will understand that if she hesitates we shall be remarked. She will allow herself to be led on, the round will be finished, I shall bring her back to her place and—we shall chat.”

Lolif had ceased waltzing, and Miss Anna now came straight to the captain bearing the hat, and he then carried out, step by step, the plan he had determined upon. But little was needed for applause to follow when Madame de Barancos banded a young girl who had just left school the jewel presented to her by Nointel. He had not foreseen this last movement, still he did not lose his head, but extricated himself like a man

of spirit from the snare set for him by the malicious marchioness. His friend Tréville happened to be near by. He sent him to the school-girl and he himself turned to the noble widow, who, having no further pretext for escape, surrendered her figure to the captain's right arm. The moment had arrived. Gaston's friend held the button in his left hand, between the thumb and forefinger; he showed it, and the marchioness turned pale. "You have worn it," she murmured; "I will take it." And with a movement quick as thought she seized hold of it and placed it in her dress body.

It was so quickly done that no one saw it, and Nointel had no time to oppose it. He was compelled to take the turn of waltzing he had been so solicitous for, without complaining of the abstracting of the accusing button. A man does not chat in waltzing, especially on serious subjects. He was, however, deeply enraged. "We shall have an explanation presently," he thought to console himself for this mishap.

He made his calculations without taking the marchioness into account. Instead of returning to her place after the regulation round, she gently disengaged herself, and, leaving her partner, advanced towards the conductress. Everyone understood that she was going to ask her to close the evolutions of the cotillon. It was her right as hostess to do so, and no one felt displeased that she should exercise it, for the time for supper had arrived, and all the ladies were laden with trinkets. A few still remained in the hat. Madame de Barancos distributed them to the least favoured, and seated herself in the midst of the circle, according to custom, to receive the salutations of the couples who passed in turn before her, bowing. Everybody, excepting Nointel, was delighted. He had, in addition, the vexation of seeing the marchioness, after the couples had passed before her, take the arm of a personage streaked with orders and constellated with medals—a grandee of Spain, who was no doubt related to her, and who happened to be at hand, to take her to supper now announced by the major-domo. The captain obtained but a look from her, but what a look! The sun of the Antilles had left its flame there. He let her go. How could he restrain her? At a ball one has neither a right to complain nor to innovate. There are established customs, and they must be conformed to. Evil had befallen Nointel for having introduced a variation.

"Well! well!" he thought, gloomily, "I have allowed myself to be beaten like a child. I did not manage to keep my pledge. I had foreseen everything except that stroke of audacity. I am now disarmed. It was well worth my while getting that button from Madame Majoré, to let it be pilfered from me the first time I showed it. And it was I myself who furnished Madame de Barancos with a pretext for taking it from me. I played the eccentric lover—I spoke of a *souvenir* which I wished to force her to accept—she seized the opportunity—and the sleeve button as well. Ah! she is an incomparable actress. When she said to me, in her ardent way: 'You have worn it, I will take it,' one would have sworn that she was enraptured with me. Suppose it were true, however? Suppose she did love me? That glance she threw at me on leaving—I was fairly dazzled. Yes, but in that case, it would not be she who killed Julia—and it was she, I am sure of that—she became pale when I showed her the button. And, then, the one does not prevent the other. She might very well have stabbed Julia, and then have been smitten with me. That would be complete, and, the deuce, if I know how I should extricate myself from the difficulty. If I proved to her that she was guilty, she might reply:

'I adore you.' And, nevertheless, I will not give up the game. I will hold on, if only to see how she will play it; and I am bound by honour to go to the end. Darcy relies on me, Poor Darcy! what shall I tell him? Nothing, by my faith! He did not know what I was going to attempt in the cotillion. Why should I inform him that my scheme has failed, since I intend to try it again? I shall be more fortunate on another occasion, and then it will be time enough to confide in him. Besides, Mademoiselle Lestérel is going to leave the prison. She will help him to be patient. Ah! here he comes. He will want to take me away. In fact, I have nothing more to do here. The marchioness has chosen those who are to sit at her table, and I am not one of them. But she has invited me to a shooting party at her place in Normandy. I shall not be able to recommence operations till then." ‡

Darcy, in fact, now advanced to rejoin his friend. The crowd had at first stopped his way, and he had been obliged to wait and let it pass. Nointel went to meet him, led him towards the door of exit, and said, while striving to appear cheerful: "My dear fellow, she slipped between my fingers. She evaded the test. I danced the cotillion for nothing."

"I suspected it," said Darcy, shrugging his shoulders.

"That is, you never believed in the success of my combinations."

"Whether I believed in them or not, they have failed."

"Temporarily; but, I swear to you, that you would do wrong to despair."

"I don't despair, since I chatted with Madame Cambry."

"She has promised you her support?"

"Yes."

"It is the best you can have as regards your uncle. Don't neglect it. As for myself, as I have no influence with Monsieur Roger Darcy, I will work for you in the case of the marchioness."

"Then you persist in thinking that she is guilty?"

"Yes, I persist."

"Why do you hide the truth from me, then?" Why don't you tell me frankly what has passed between that woman and yourself while you were waltzing with her? I saw it."

"What did you see?"

"That she turned pale, and that she took an object you held in your hand. Did you pass her a *billet-doux*?"

Nointel reflected a moment, and then said to Gaston, looking him straight in the face: "You suspect me. You do wrong. I can tell you nothing this evening, except that I had a little preparatory scene with the Baraucos. The final one will be played very soon, and as soon as it is played, you shall know all. A drama such as I am conducting has several acts, and the situations return more than once. Have you ever seen 'La Tour de Nesle' performed?"

Darcy made an impatient gesture.

"Yes, you must have seen it in your youth. Very well, imagine to yourself that I am Buridan, that the Baraucos is Marguerite de Bourgogne, and think of the famous phrase—'Well done, Marguerite, you have won the first bout; but to me the second.' After that, the curtain falls, if I remember rightly. So now let us be going."

III.

Who has never asked himself where the woman, who passes by like a bird in the air, is going,—the woman whom you admire on the wing, and whom you will never see again? When she is on foot, you have the means of following her, and of cherishing a thousand chimeras until the moment when she prosaically enters a shop—her stationer's, or her milliner's, or her lawyer's office. But when she is in a carriage she is like a falling star which flashes for a moment and is gone. What becomes of the falling stars? Astronomers claim that they know, and poets let them speak. They prefer to invent romances. They imagine that the common cab in which they have perceived a beautiful form and a sweet face, bears away their ideal happiness—the happiness dreamed of; the ideal mistress; the one whom they always desire but never meet; and for three months they are enraptured with the remembrance of the vision. At nine o'clock in the morning, in winter, in the Faubourg Saint-Denis, poets are rare, but matter-of-fact people abound, and among those who were going to business, on the morning following the ball given by the marchioness, more than one turned to look at a young girl seated in an open victoria. She had raised her veil, and was inhaling to the full capacity of her lungs the fresh air of one of the few fine days which the heavens had granted to the earth towards the end of that fearful winter. The morning breeze swept past her rosy cheeks and raised the locks of her hair badly arranged under a brown hood. By the way she gazed around her, one would have said that she was in Paris for the first time, and, indeed, several citizens, espying a little bundle lying at her feet in the vehicle, thought: "A country girl just arrived by the Northern Railway; more good looks than baggage;" while certain hawkers sneered: "There goes a wench who has risen early to take breakfast with her lover."

None, however, divined that this charming traveller had just left prison. Berthe Lestérel had been awakened at dawn, and had almost fainted with joy on learning that she was about to be liberated. The director had cautiously added, however, that the liberty which was about to be granted her was but temporary; that no order for discharge had been given; and that, consequently, she still remained at the disposition of justice. The poor child had wept bitterly, and was almost ready to refuse to profit by so sad a favour. But she had no choice; the order was formal. She had to submit to the formalities of a release from prison; receive the little money she had left at the office; the garments sent to her by an anonymous friend whose name she divined; say farewell to the Sisters who had consoled her during her confinement, and leave in a cab, which a keeper had gone in search of, being careful to select an open one for reasons which Berthe divined on seeing a man of seedy appearance get into a second cab near the prison door just as she came out. She was to be watched; she had been allowed to hear that. The surveillance now began. But she resolved to supplicate the magistrate to revoke his decision, and to send her back to jail if he did not consent to deliver her from the incessant espionage which was to be imposed upon her. She did not want liberty at that price. What could she do with it? How could she return to the Rue de Ponthieu followed by a detective, who would mount guard in front of her house? This was perpetual

shame; and Berthe did not feel courage enough to support this incessant humiliation. Moreover, did she know if she had a friend left? Did she know whether her brother-in-law would even allow her to see her sister? What reception was reserved for her? Would not every door be closed to an unfortunate girl, released from Saint-Lazare by favour, and threatened with a return there?

On reflection, Berthe had herself conveyed to the Palais de Justice, where she expected to find M. Roger Darcy, who alone had the power to decide her fate. She alighted in front of the law courts, to the profound astonishment of the detective who followed her. Ordinarily, released prisoners do not take that direction. A guard whom she questioned sent her to an usher, who informed her that M. Roger Darcy was not in his office, and that he would not be there all day. She did not dare to ask him where the judge resided, and she then thought of going in search of the only protectress who perhaps remained to her—Madame Cambry. "Avenue d'Eylau," she said to the coachman.

The detective was not far distant. He heard and made a grimace, but as he had orders to follow without interfering, he was obliged to get into his cab and go wherever it pleased the young girl to lead him. Never had he seen any one under surveillance conduct herself in this way. The drive, which did not amuse this man, was charming to Berthe, however. The Champs-Élysées were full of light and noise. Children were playing in the walks, and horsemen went along the avenue at full trot. Life abounded, and Berthe closed her eyes in thinking of the dark, cold cell to which she nevertheless aspired to return. However, her heart beat violently when, after having passed half way down the Avenue d'Eylau, she perceived Madame Cambry's residence. An old valet, who knew Mademoiselle Lestérel well, and who did not appear greatly surprised to see her, stood at the gateway. He received her politely, and told her that his mistress had gone out very early, in a cab—a double infraction of her habits—that she must have gone to some funeral service, for she had dressed herself in mourning, but had said she would return before noon. He did not propose to Berthe to wait, and she did not dare to ask permission. She contented herself with replying that she would return in an hour's time.

Intimidated, no doubt, by the handsome appearance of the mansion, the detective had had his cab stopped at some distance from the gate, and Mademoiselle Lestérel no longer thought of him when she told her driver to take her to the Bois de Boulogne. He hesitated a little, for this fare, taken up at Saint-Lazare, did not inspire him with the greatest confidence; but, on reflection, he thought that she was no doubt solvent, since the liveried servant had spoken to her with such deference. So he whipped up his horse and the victoria started, always followed at a distance by the other vehicle containing the police agent. Why was Berthe going to the Bois? She herself could not have told. She went where the favour of freedom carried her, the need of air and space which makes the bird whose cage door is opened stretch his wings and fly straight before him. She forgot little by little the sorrows of the past, the anguish of the present, the uncertainty of the future. She lost herself in a dream, and it seemed to her that this dream would last for ever.

It finished at the Porte Dauphine, where she met a number of people on horseback—gentlemen and ladies taking, according to fashion, their morning ride. The scene was so full of animation that Berthe,

disturbed in her reflections, begged the driver to take a less frequented road, and he turned into the Allée des Fortifications. He was even glad to earn an hour or two's hire without tiring his beast; his hand slackened the reins, and his eyes closed little by little. The detective began to ask himself how this drive would end, and he was by no means pleased, although he still followed at a distance of thirty paces. The victoria went along close to the underwood, and the horse, abandoned to himself, stopped from time to time to nibble some grass from the bank. He ended by coming across a spot where the herbage was thicker, and here he stopped altogether. The driver, softly rocked, had fallen asleep, and Mademoiselle Lestérel had no thought of disturbing his repose. She watched two finches, who were flying round a hawthorn bush in which they had commenced to build their nest, and thought of the happy times when she had scoured the woods of Saint-Mandé with her schoolmates. She was seized with the desire to alight and enter the thicket; to stir up the dead leaves, rotting since the previous autumn; to catch her dress among the brambles; and run about as she had done when a child. She indeed was about to spring to the ground when she heard the noise of a horse's hoofs near by. A horseman came slowly forward along a bridle-path which traversed the coppice. Bertie thought only of evading him. The horse drew near, however, and the finches took flight. "Go on," she said to the driver. But the driver, sound asleep, did not stir, and before she had time to call louder to him, the horseman appeared at the corner of the road. She recognised him and gave a cry of surprise. Gaston Darcy was before her—Gaston Darcy, pale with emotion and joy, for he had recognised her. "You!" he exclaimed, guiding his horse to the side of the victoria; "you here!"

"I did not foresee that I should meet you here," murmured Mademoiselle Lestérel, in a husky voice.

"At last I see you again! You are free."

"Free? Look."

She showed him the detective, who having left his cab advanced slowly. Gaston understood, and darted towards this fellow, who, on seeing himself charged hotly by a horseman, prudently jumped the ditch, and took up a position on the edge of the underwood.

"Why do you follow this vehicle?" Gaston asked him, with a menacing air.

"Because I have received orders to do so. I am quite willing to tell you so, although it does not concern you."

"You have received orders to watch this lady; you have not received orders to watch those who talk to her, or to listen to what she says. I know it. I am the nephew of Monsieur Roger Darcy, the investigating magistrate. Here is my card."

The detective took the piece of cardboard held out to him by Gaston, and the name he read on it produced its effect. "I have been charged with following the cab," he grumbled. "I am only doing my duty, and I should do it even though you were the President of the Republic. But you can chat with the young lady, if that gives you any pleasure. I will put the thing on my report, and that is all about it."

Gaston quickly understood that it was useless to dispute an order, and returned to Mademoiselle Lestérel. "Monsieur," she said to him, "I beg of you to go and find Monsieur Roger Darcy, and ask him to authorise me to remain in prison until my fate is decided."

"What!" exclaimed Gaston; "you wish——"

"Imprisonment is better than the liberty granted me. I have just come from the Palais de Justice. Unfortunately, I did not find Monsieur Darcy there, for, no doubt, he would have listened to my prayer; then I went to Madame Cambry's; I hoped that she would not refuse to speak for me. She had gone out, her servant told me, but she was expected back in an hour. It was then that I had the idea of coming here to wait until she returned——"

"You regret it?"

"Yes. I ought not to have shown myself; I know it. I ought to have fled from society; but I could not resist the temptation. It is so long since I had seen the sun, and, perhaps, I shall see it no more."

"You have not, then, thought of those who love you?"

"Those who love me! where are they? They may still pity me; they can no longer love me."

"I loved you, you know it; and my feelings have not changed. I never believed in the odious accusation which has weighed upon you; and to prove to you that I never believed it, I supplicate you again to consent to be my wife. You do not reply—you are shocked to hear me use this language—here, before the detective who spies upon you—before the cabman who drives you. But what do these men matter to me. I would that all who know me were here to listen. What I have just said to you I am ready to repeat in the presence of Madame Cambry, who will approve of it, for she wishes for this marriage almost as ardently as I do."

"Madame Cambry!" exclaimed Bérthe. "No—that is impossible. I know that she has not forgotten me, but she cannot desire——"

"She wishes you to become her niece."

"Her niece?"

"Yes; her marriage with my uncle is determined upon, and she has told him that she will not marry him until you are completely free—as long as the order of discharge is not issued."

At these words, Mademoiselle Lestérel burst into tears. She had at first succeeded in controlling herself, but her emotion finally broke forth.

"And it is at the moment when my heart is overflowing with joy, when we reach the end of our misfortunes, it is at this moment that you think of returning to prison! You, then, have no pity for me, who no longer live since I lost you? Oh! I divine what you are going to say to me. You don't wish me to witness the humiliation imposed upon you—this following about by a detective; but it will cease, don't doubt it. Madame Cambry will obtain its cessation. My uncle did not understand that you were to be kept in sight. The orders he gave have been wrongly construed, that I am sure of. He will modify them. He will modify them this very day. Only yesterday—last night—he spoke to me of a discreet surveillance. He does not wish—he cannot wish, that you should be followed step by step, that a police officer should be posted at the door of your house——"

"It was because I feared that, that I have not returned there."

"You must return there, so as to be there to receive Madame Cambry's visit. My uncle knows that she is going to see you. Do you believe that he would suffer her to set foot in your residence if she would have to meet police officials on her way?"

"What! Madame Cambry told you——"

"That she should see you to-day. Yes, certainly. You have just told me that she had gone out. Who knows but it is to your residence that she has gone?"

"Oh, my God!" murmured Berthe Lestérel, "and I, who hardly dared to present myself at her door!"

"You have in her a friend—more than a friend, a sister, to whom you can confide everything. You need not fear that she will betray you; and as for me, I swear to you that she will serve you with unlimited devotion. And now, will you permit me to participate with her in your defence; will you permit me to accompany her when she calls on you?"

"I should like—yes, I should like, in the first place, to see her alone," stammered the young girl.

"I understand you, mademoiselle," exclaimed Gaston; "and, before all, I will deliver you from an intolerable persecution. I will go, in all haste, to my uncle's; I will ask him to write at once for this officer to be removed. Have enough courage to go to the Rue de Ponthieu. Perhaps you will find Madame Cambry there. I will pass by her residence, and if she has returned——"

"It would, indeed, be better for me not to present myself there. I place myself under your guidance, sir; you who have inspired me with a little hope. I will follow your advice, and you can tell my generous protectress that I will await her at my home."

Berthe had divined what Darcy had not dared avow to her. She felt that the future wife of the examining magistrate could no longer receive her, and so she determined to take the step which had inspired her with so much dread. Gaston's new-found sympathy had rekindled her energy. She felt willing to struggle against the fatalities which overwhelmed her, and no longer disdained the semi-liberty accorded her. Gaston realized that this scene had lasted long enough. A lover on horseback is badly placed for expressing what he feels, and the cab-driver's presence exceedingly embarrassed him, without speaking of the detective, who was also an unwished-for observer. Besides, he longed to obtain from his uncle a modification of the precautionary measures, which it had been considered necessary to take with a young girl who had no thought of absconding. And he only awaited, before leaving, one word from Berthe—a word which would compensate him from his sufferings. Mademoiselle Lestérel did not pronounce it, but she extended her hand to him. He took this hand and covered it with such ardent kisses that the young girl quickly withdrew it. "Rely on me," he said, as he set spurs to his horse, which started off at full speed.

Berthe followed him with her eyes until he disappeared at the turning of the Allée des Fortifications, and, controlling her emotion, she told the cabman, who had remained exceedingly indifferent to what had been said behind him, to drive her to the Rue de Ponthieu. He swore a little, but started off.

The detective got back into his cab. He perceived that he was engaged in an exceptional affair, and followed at a greater distance. The victoria did not go fast, and the journey lasted almost an hour, more time than it had required for Darcy to go to the Rue de Rougemont, by way of the Avenue d'Eylau.

On arriving at the door of her residence, Mademoiselle Lestérel saw, with pleasure, the spy pass beyond, alight from his vehicle fifty paces farther on and enter the shop of a wine-dealer—enter is not exactly the

word, since he stopped at the threshold. He still watched, but he began to do so less openly. There were some exclamations in the door-keeper's lodge when Mademoiselle Lestérel was seen to appear; but she had always been so kind and affable that she was not badly received, and but few questions were addressed to her. The door-keeper, who was a great gossip, related to her, with plenty of details, that on the very day when she had been arrested, a lady had come in a fine equipage and asked for Mademoiselle Lestérel. Berthe, who from this description, recognised Madame Cambry, did not fail to say that this lady would probably come again, and to request that she should be sent up-stairs. She thus, by a fortunate incident, recovered at the first stroke the consideration of the door-keeper. He carried his civility so far as to charge himself with the package brought by Berthe, and to trouble himself to go and open the apartment which no one had entered since the search made by M. Roger Darcy. Poor Berthe wept on again beholding the modest rooms in which she had passed such happy days. Everything therein already had the air of abandonment. A thick coating of dust covered the furniture. The flowers she had cultivated in a stand were dead. The piano was open, and Berthe turned pale as she recognised upon the rack the music of Martini's air, the last song she had sung with Gaston. She had often repeated that sad prophetic air since the evening at Madame Cambry's, and she again found it there as a warning from God to prepare her for new misfortunes. She did not have time to dwell on this discouraging thought, however, for suddenly the bell rang; she ran and opened the door, and Madame Cambry threw herself into her arms.

For a few moments there was an exchange of kisses and broken sentences. Mademoiselle Lestérel choked with emotion, and the beautiful widow was almost as much moved as she. "You are here, then!" she said, affectionately. "Ah! I am very happy to see you again, for I have not ceased to think of you for a single moment."

"I know that you have defended me—protected me," murmured Berthe; "I know that I owe all to you."

"You owe me nothing. You are innocent, I am sure of it. How could I have done less than plead your cause? God has allowed me to gain it. You are saved."

"Alas! I dare not believe it. I have been liberated out of pity—because Monsieur Roger Darcy is kind-hearted, and because you interceded for me—but my liberty can be taken from me to-morrow."

"No; for we will prove that you are not guilty."

"How prove it, as long as the woman who committed that horrible murder is not found?"

"What matters the finding of her? Are there not crimes which remain unpunished? Will justice strike an innocent person because it cannot discover the real culprit? No; that would be an iniquity. Justify yourself, Berthe. That will suffice."

"Justify myself! what can I say that I have not already said? Appearances accuse me."

"Not all," said Madame Cambry, quickly. "You do not know what has happened during the last few days, you do not know to what fortunate circumstance you owe your liberation."

"No. I know nothing."

"Come, I will inform you," continued the widow, drawing Berthe towards a lounge, on which she made her sit down beside her. "But, in

the first place, permit me to talk to you with open heart. Yes, appearances do accuse you ; yes, your obstinate silence misled Monsieur Darcy. You have serious reasons for your silence, I am persuaded of that, and if the avowals you might make would compromise another, I do not blame you for not making them. But I could better defend you if I knew what you have hidden from your judge. Berthe, I am your best friend. Berthe, you have confidence in me; is that not so? Very well, why should you not tell me all the truth?"

"I have said all I could say," murmured Mademoiselle Lestérel.

"All you could say to an examining magistrate, and I can very well explain to myself your refusal to tell him more. A judge is a man, and there are matters we never confide to a man, even though that man were our best friend. But I, my dear child, I am not a magistrate, I am a woman ; and in my capacity as a woman I understand all weaknesses ; I excuse them ; I am ready to defend them. Admit yours to me, as you would admit them to a lawyer, if—God grant it may not be so—this absurd accusation should have its sequel."

"I have had no weaknesses," said Berthe, lifting up her head.

"I believe it. I badly expressed myself, and I will be more exact. The murder committed on—that woman has been imputed to you. The charge is insensate. Why should you have killed her? You scarcely knew her, and you had no grievance against her. If you have been suspected, it is because the weapon used by the murderer belongs to you."

"I never killed her."

"No, but you denied that you had been to the ball at the opera house, or, at least, when you were questioned on that point, you refused to reply. You did not wish to lie, and you kept silent. And, nevertheless, you went there, that is evident enough."

Mademoiselle Lestérel did not reply. She wept.

"I beg of you, my dear Berthe," continued Madame Cambry, in an agitated voice, "don't suppose that I wish to draw your secrets from you to communicate them to Monsieur Darcy. I am going to marry him. I esteem him, I love him ; but I should despise him, I should despise myself, if he had dared to charge me with making you talk, and if I had accepted that vile mission."

"That thought is far from me, madame, I swear it to you."

"Very well ; since you recognise that I am loyally devoted to you, don't treat me as though I were your enemy or your judge. Confess the truth to me. Need I add that if I am anxious to know it, it is so that I may the better serve your interests, it is so that I may be able to affirm to Monsieur Darcy that you are innocent? Perhaps you fear to compromise me with him ; perhaps you fear that he will summon me to explain my affirmation, and that from the silence with which I shall oppose him he will draw new inductions against you. If you fear that, you are mistaken. Monsieur Darcy is a magistrate, but he is a man of honour. He will exact nothing from me, and he will put a great deal of reliance on my opinion. Perhaps, also, you don't know that his powers are unlimited ; that an examining magistrate only obeys his conscience, and that if he were convinced that you were not guilty, he could, of his own power, and without consulting any one, issue an order of discharge."

"I know that I am indebted to him for being liberated for a few days."

"But you don't know why he took that step. Very well, my dear

Berthe. I will inform you, for I wish to show you to what extent Monsieur Darcy is just; and how scrupulously he discharges the delicate functions of his office. You have been informed that the domino and mask which you made use of were found in the street, and recognised by the person who sold them to you."

"I was confronted, in fact, with that woman——"

"And you did not deny her statements. You contented yourself with remaining silent, as you have always done. Monsieur Darcy saw in that only another proof that you had been to the ball. But, a few days afterwards, the man who had brought the domino and mask—a police-officer, I believe—came and declared that he had found them before three o'clock in the morning. Now, it seems that this woman was killed at three o'clock. Monsieur Darcy did not hesitate to recognise that this was an indication in your favour, and that your innocence, in which he no longer believed, might yet be demonstrated. And to spare you useless severities he immediately signed the order to which I owe the happiness of seeing you again."

"And so," said Mademoiselle Lestérel, much moved, "Monsieur Darcy admits now that it would not be impossible for me to justify myself."

"He admits it so well that he awaits but one word from you to take a definitive step—a word which would explain the employment of your time during that fatal night. That word, which it cost you so much to utter before him, tell it to me, Berthe; confide all to me, and, I again swear to you, that, without revealing your secret, I will persuade Monsieur Darcy——"

"Will you also swear to me that another—that no one in the world shall know what I reveal to you?"

"I swear it to you. Neither Monsieur Roger Darcy nor Monsieur Gaston Darcy shall obtain from me the slightest word; I will not betray you any more than you would betray me if I had a fault to reproach myself with and confessed it to you."

Mademoiselle Lestérel still hesitated, and it was in a broken voice that she replied: "I would like to speak, but I lack the strength."

Madame Cambry took hold of her hands, pressed them in her own, and said to her gently: "Would you like me to put some questions to you, to spare you the embarrassment of a long and painful narrative?"

"Yes," stammered the young girl, "it would be better so. If you did not question me, I could not collect my thoughts."

"I will commence, then," continued the compassionate widow. "This woman wrote to you, did she not? A fragment of a note was found here, which she had addressed to you."

"That is true—she wrote to me."

"A few days before the ball—on a Tuesday?"

"I believe so."

"By the post?"

"No, it was her maid who brought me the note."

"In fact, the maid declared so, and added, that after having read it, you replied: 'Say that I will go.'"

"That is correct."

"And her mistress gave you an appointment for half-past two. This indication was found on the strip of paper which had escaped burning in the fire into which you threw it?"

"Yes—but——"

"Some letters were in question which this woman had in her possession, and which she proposed to surrender to you."

"What makes you think that?" asked Berthe, in a state of great agitation.

"I divined it. A young girl, pure and proud, would not have consented to meet a fast woman, if it were not for the purpose of saving the honour of some one dear to her. I have never thought, and will never admit, that the letters were from you. Monsieur Darcy only supposed so, because it seemed strange to him that, in a negotiation of that kind, an intermediary should be employed. But she who wrote those letters was, no doubt, in a condition which rendered her unable to go for them. Oh, I do not ask you who they were from," added Madame Cambry, quickly, in reply to a gesture from Berthe; "it suffices for me to know that, if you went to the ball, it was, as I have always believed, to accomplish an act of devotion. And you did go there; is it not true?" Mademoiselle Lestrel nodded affirmatively.

"On leaving my house?" added Madame Cambry; whereupon Berthe nodded again. "About midnight, then," continued the widow. "But you were not dressed for a masquerade ball?"

"I wore a black dress. The domino and mask which I had bought, were in the cab which brought me, and which waited for me at the door of your residence."

"And you put them on during the journey? The appointment was fixed for half-past two. You did not go straight to the opera house?"

"An incident had occurred unexpectedly at the last moment—an incident which obliged me to pass a part of the night in a distant neighbourhood," replied Berthe, in a feeble voice. "It was a question of saving the honour—the life of the same person——"

"She whom the letters compromised?"

"Yes."

"Then this woman who presented herself on behalf of your sick sister——"

"Came to announce to me that a great danger threatened the person, and that I had not a minute to lose if it was to be averted. I had foreseen this danger for some days, and I had given instructions so that I could be warned at any moment, if it became imminent. I never absented myself without saying where I was going."

"That explains very well why a person called for you at my house; but—forgive me for persisting—that does not explain to me what you did after leaving me——"

"You will understand it, madame. The danger was everywhere. I wished to obtain the letters which Madame d'Orcival threatened to send—if I did not go for them—to——"

"To an enemy—no matter his name—to an enemy of the friend whom you were seeking to save."

"And I wished to hasten—there where I was summoned, and where my presence would be required for several hours. Then I thought that my interview with Madame d'Orcival would be very short; that she would perhaps reach her box as soon as the ball commenced; that, if I found her there, I might take the letters and then go——"

"Where you went," interrupted Madame Cambry, who seemed to strive delicately to spare Berthe useless and embarrassing avowals, since they would have introduced another woman into the case.

"Will you allow me now to ask you at what time you entered the opera house?"

"At half-past twelve, I believe."

"You went straight to the box of this woman, D'Orceival? You found her there alone?" Berthe nodded. "She did not reproach you for anticipating the time of the appointment?"

"Yes, at first. She even used harsh words to me—she made me cruelly feel that she held in her hands the honour of—of one of my friends. Then she softened. She returned me the letters, and pressed me to leave, because she waited another person."

"She told you that! You are sure of it?"

"Quite sure, madame, and it was the truth, for I saw plainly that she was anxious to send me away."

"But this person—she did not name her to you—she did not tell you why she was coming?"

"No," replied Berthe, a little surprised at the persistence shown by Madame Cambry in questioning her on this point.

"Understand the object of my questions," continued the widow; "if it was proved that a woman came after you into the box—and it could certainly be proved—it could no longer be doubted that the murder was committed by that woman. On leaving, you did not meet her—at the door of the box?"

"No, madame, I noticed no one; I was in a hurry to leave. I hastened from the building, took a cab, and was driven——"

"To the other end of Paris. And, on the way, you rid yourself of your domino and mask; you threw them out of the cab door——"

"Yes; I did not wish to preserve these proofs of my visit to Madame d'Orceival at the masquerade ball."

"It is very fortunate that you had that idea. The things were picked up before three o'clock—so that you were no longer at the opera house when—for you did not return there, I presume?"

"What should I have gone there for? I had the letters."

"And you burned them on returning home, at about four o'clock."

"Yes, at once."

Madame Cambry had listened attentively and feelingly to Berthe's replies, and she judged them so satisfactory that she kissed the young girl on both cheeks, saying to her: "Thanks for having trusted me. Now, I can assure you that you are saved."

"You promised me that you would tell nothing to Monsieur Darcy!" exclaimed Berthe.

"Nothing that it is necessary to keep silent, so as not to compromise the friend for whom you sacrificed yourself; no, certainly not. But I can swear to him that you are innocent, and he will believe me. He will have to believe me."

"God grant it, madame. If Monsieur Darcy exacted a confession, which I am resolved not to make to him, I should resign myself to submit to my fate rather than speak out."

"I should approve of your doing so," said Madame Cambry, in a firm voice. "If you were to speak, it would be Monsieur Darcy's duty to seek for the person for whom you devoted yourself, and it is probable that he would find her. It is better that he should merely divine something approaching the truth. He could then content himself with the moral proofs which are all in your favour, and which the discovery of the

domino, found before three o'clock on the Boulevard de la Villette, completes in the most satisfactory way. In the condition of affairs, it seems to me impossible that he should persist in the accusation, even although he might still have some doubts as to your innocence. However," she added, after a short pause, "there is one detail of which we have scarcely spoken, and which is, nevertheless, of great importance. The poniard—which was found in the box—it belonged to you?"

"Yes," replied Mademoiselle Lestérel, sadly, "that poniard belonged to me. I recognised it as soon as Monsieur Le Roy showed it to me. How should I not have recognised it? There is, perhaps, not another like it in all Paris. My brother-in-law, who gave it me, brought it from Japan."

"You had it when you were at my house, I have been told?"

"Yes, madame; I showed it to Monsieur Gaston Darcy."

"I did not notice it. Then you had it when you arrived at the ball?"

"Unfortunately. I did not foresee what use would be made of it. I held it in my hand when I entered the box. It attracted Madame d'Orcival's attention. She took it and examined it, and said to me, smiling, that I owed her a recompense for the service she had rendered to my friend."

"And she asked you to give it to her?"

"Yes; I could not refuse it to her. I was too happy at having the letters."

"What a strange fatality! That unfortunate woman herself prepared her tragic death by making you give her the weapon which was to strike her death-blow. Who knows but what the sight of that poniard inspired the thought of murder to the woman who killed her? Can you not imagine the scene? This woman had premeditated nothing; she did not think of committing a crime, but a quarrel takes place—a violent quarrel. Madame d'Orcival, after having insulted her, threatens her with that knife; the other woman, carried away with anger, snatches it from her hand, and then——"

"My God!" interrupted Berthe, "I remember now that Julia said to me, drawing the poniard from the sheath: 'I am going to have a stormy interview presently. If the person who is coming should take a notion to do me a bad turn, this fan will serve for my defence.' And she played with the murderous weapon; she tried the point on her gloved hand. Ah! it is horrible!"

"Yes, it is horrible," murmured Madame Cambry, shuddering. "If you had repeated those words to Monsieur Darcy, the investigation would have taken quite a different direction. But to have repeated them it would have been necessary——"

"To have admitted that I had seen Julia, and Monsieur Darcy would have asked me to prove that I had left the box almost immediately after entering it. To have proved that it would have been necessary for me to state where I went—and, even now, if I were to avow the truth, he would still exact explanations which I will not give him. I shall keep silent."

"And perhaps you will do right. Silence is better than an incomplete justification. In the midst of so much uncertainty, Monsieur Darcy will only look at the fact that you are innocent—a fact I shall often recall to him. The domino having been found before three o'clock in the morning will save you. You will be silent, my dear Berthe; I will speak for you."

"And, now," added Madame Cambry, after slight hesitation, "allow me to address you a question to which you can, I think, reply without compromising your friend. I did not ask you from whom those letters

came which were returned to you by Madame d'Orcival, but I ask you if you know to whom they were addressed."

Mademoiselle Lestérel blushed deeply. "I know," she replied, with considerable embarrassment, "but I beg you to excuse me from informing you. It is a secret which does not belong to me. I have burned the letters. I wish to forget the name of the man who received them."

"You knew this man then?"

"No, madame. I have seen him—he was pointed out to me, but I never spoke to him."

"It is strange—I was thinking, how is it that he keeps aloof! It is impossible that he can be ignorant of what is taking place. He has been if not the direct, at least the indirect cause of a murder; he knows that a young girl is accused of that murder—and he does not interfere when his intervention might save her—he hides himself."

"He is dead."

Madame Cambry started, and restrained an exclamation which had been on the point of escaping her. Then in an agitated voice she said: "I understand it all now. I can explain to myself how Madame d'Orcival came into possession of those letters. A few days before the ball at which she was killed, the newspapers related that a foreigner had committed suicide at her house. The letters which have cost you so dear were—"

"For pity's sake, madame, do not name him," exclaimed Mademoiselle Lestérel. "My unfortunate friend has suffered so much through him—that name recalls such cruel recollections to me—that I cannot hear it uttered without feeling sick at heart."

"Calm yourself, my dear Berthe, I will not utter it. God knows I do not wish to afflict you." There was silence. The young girl held down her head, and Madame Cambry evidently hesitated to question her any further. "One word," she said, finally, "one only. How far back dates the connection between this man and the person you hold dear?"

"It commenced about a year ago, and ended a few months since," replied Berthe, somewhat astonished.

"I ask you this in your interest. I am your advocate. It is necessary that I should know all. But I already know enough to enable me to gain the case I am going to plead before Monsieur Darcy. Let us now talk about yourself—of your future."

"My future! what future can await me? Nothing would be left to me but death, were it not that your friendship still links me to life. And nothing of all I have lost will return to me."

"You have not lost Monsieur Gaston Darcy's love? His feelings have not changed. Your misfortune has only had the effect of making them stronger. He is resolved to marry you, and I need not tell you that I approve of it. His uncle will not oppose it, and this marriage will take place at the same time as mine. I wish you to be happy, my dear Berthe, and something will be wanting to my happiness if I do not secure yours."

"I cannot be Monsieur Gaston Darcy's wife," said Mademoiselle Lestérel in a firm tone.

"Why? He loves you, you love him—I am certain that you love him. You do not answer me. Am I then mistaken?" Berthe bowed her head and burst into tears. "No," continued Madame Cambry, "I am not mistaken. For me not to have read your heart it would have been necessary never to have loved."

"You have not suffered," murmured the young girl; "you cannot realise what I suffer."

"How do you know that? I am a woman, and all women have their share of life's bitterness. God has spared me the horrible trial you have passed through; perhaps he has others in reserve for me. If He sends them I shall accept them without complaint, and I shall not lose courage. Despair is cowardly. Do not allow yourself to be overcome. Your conscience has no reproaches for you. Despise the world's opinion. Monsieur Gaston Darcy despises it. Why should you be less courageous than he is? Fools will blame him for marrying you. But what matters that to you if you love him?"

"It is because I love him that I reject his generous offers. I do not wish the fatality which overwhelms me to fall on him. He bears a respected name; he has a stainless past. I do not wish him to share the disgrace into which I have fallen."

"Is it for you to yield to considerations which he casts under his feet? Believe me, Berthe, don't think so much of a prejudice which he braves. Get married, and when you are united, walk with uplifted head, hand in hand. Your love will sustain you. Love is everything. The rest is but smoke. I swear to you that if, like you, I was attacked by calumny, I should not hesitate a second about becoming the wife of the gallant man who has done me the honour to ask for my hand."

"Alas!" sighed Berthe, profoundly agitated, "you forget that I am still under suspicion; that to-morrow, perhaps, I shall be taken back to that horrible prison, which I shall only leave to submit to the shame of a public trial. When could I marry Monsieur Darcy? Is it while I am under an infamous accusation? Would it be after I have been arraigned in public, when the Lestérel affair has figured among the celebrated cases? Whether I am convicted or acquitted, the dishonour will be the same."

"You will marry Monsieur Gaston Darcy," replied Madame Cambry, "when Monsieur Roger Darcy has fully recognised your innocence, by declaring officially that there is no longer any reason for imprisoning you. And do not tell me that this declaration will not suffice to rehabilitate you. We shall be three to impose silence on malevolent people—your husband, mine, and myself. No one will think of disputing the honourability of a woman whom we cover with our protection. Promise me, then, my dear child, that you will at once consent to receive Monsieur Gaston Darcy, your affianced husband. I wished to see you alone, in the first place, but I will bring him to you to-morrow. And, while waiting till you grant him this happiness, tell me how I can serve you. I will see you every day; if you have any delicate step to take, if you think that my presence will be useful to you in any way, dispose of me."

Mademoiselle Lestérel's face brightened. "What!" she exclaimed, "you would consent——"

"To do anything to help you. Speak."

"I have a sister whom I love tenderly."

"And whom you have not seen since your arrest. I know it."

"She is ignorant, no doubt, that I have been released, and I do not know whether she is still alive, for she was seriously ill at the time of my arrest, and I was unable to receive news of her—I was in close confinement."

"Reassure yourself, my dear Berthe. I am certain that nothing grievous has happened to her. Monsieur Roger Darcy has spoken of her

to me several times. He took her evidence, and also that of your brother-in-law, who is a naval officer, is he not?"

"He commands a merchant vessel; and since you speak of him, madame, I will make bold enough to confess to you that I tremble at the mere thought of the reception he will give me. He is an excellent man, but exceedingly violent, and I fear that he is very badly-disposed towards me on account of what has happened. Already, at one time, I involuntarily irritated him. I had taken my sister's part against him, under circumstances——"

"Which I do not need to know. But you must be anxious to embrace your sister."

"My first visit ought to have been to her. I feel for Mathilde an affection which she fully returns, and my misfortune is killing her. She has confidence in me alone. Without me she cannot watch over—some personal interests. My presence would give her back life again, and I lack the courage to go and see her. What should I reply to her husband if he questioned me; if he asked me about this accusation, which he, no doubt, believes well founded; if he reproached me with having dishonoured him? If his anger fell on me alone, I should not hesitate; but I fear being the occasion of a disagreement between my sister and himself. He will, perhaps, refuse to believe me when I try to justify myself. If he drives me away, if he forbids Mathilde seeing me, she will oppose him, and——"

"Shall we go there together? When I have told him who I am, and affirm that you are innocent, he will believe me. The word of your judge's future wife will have some weight, I hope."

"Oh! madame, if you did that, if you appeased him, if you succeeded in reconciling me with him, you would save us, my sister and I—for you do not know, you cannot know——"

"I divine all," interrupted Madame Cambry, smiling. "Let us go. Your sister suffers terrible anxiety. She must not be kept waiting."

"What! you are willing to go at once——"

"Certainly. I have my carriage below. We will go together. Your sister lives in the Rue Caumartin, I believe. We shall be there in a few minutes. I will effect the reconciliation, and when that is done, I will leave you with your family. There is only Monsieur Gaston Darcy who will be inconvenienced by this arrangement. He hoped to see you as early as this morning, but he will have to be patient until to-morrow. Come, you have no toilet to make, since you had not yet taken off your hat when I arrived. What retains you?"

"A request I have to make of you, madame. I beg of you not to speak to my brother-in-law of my presence at the ball at the opera house, or of those letters——"

"Fear nothing of the kind, my dear Berthe. I understand the situation. But before you go out, would you not do as well to tell your door-keeper—in case Monsieur Gaston should come during your absence—that you have gone to your sister's. If you did not take this precaution, Gaston, whom I know, would be fancying all kinds of things."

"You are right, madame. I will follow your advice," replied Berthe.

Madame Cambry was already on the stairs. The instructions were given to the door-keeper—general instructions, for Berthe would not give them specially for a gentleman. That would have had the appearance of making an appointment with him at Madame Crozon's. On stepping

into the street, Berthe had the pleasure of perceiving that the detective officer was no longer to be seen, and she thought that Gaston had already kept his promise in obtaining from his uncle the suppression of this disagreeable surveillance. Berthe rejoiced all the more at being rid of him, as she especially wished to go as soon as possible to a distant quarter of Paris, and it was very important for her that this journey should remain secret. The drive to the Rue Caumartin was soon over; and on the way Madame Cambry strove with her accustomed kindness to divert Berthe from the sad thoughts which still beset her. She asked her for some particulars about M. Crozon; his past life, his character, his marriage; she wished, she said, to know him before approaching him, so as not to take a false direction in talking to him. Berthe informed her to the best of her ability, and had no trouble in explaining to her what kind of a man her brother-in-law was. While ascending the stairs the widow proposed leaving Berthe in the ante-room and presenting herself alone, so as to spare Madame Crozon the deep emotion she would experience on unexpectedly seeing her sister, and also to prepare the terrible brother-in-law for the interview, sound his disposition, and try to modify it if hostile. Berthe accepted this prudent arrangement, and when the servant presented herself, she begged her to merely inform her master that a lady wished to speak to him on particular business. "Monsieur and madame are at table," replied the girl; "they will be very pleased to see mademoiselle again."

Berthe, surprised and delighted, asked in a low voice what had taken place since her arrest, and was informed that a great change had been accomplished, a revolution in the best sense of the word. M. Crozon was reconciled to his wife, who was feeling much better, and they often talked of Berthe. This colloquy led to the abandonment of Madame Cambry's plan. Moreover, at this moment the dining-room door opened and Crozon showed himself on the threshold. As soon as he perceived Berthe, he held out both hands to her, without taking time to bow to Madame Cambry, who smiled with satisfaction on beholding this spontaneous reconciliation. It was quite a different matter when Madame Crozon appeared, attracted by a voice which she hesitated to recognise; she gave a cry, threw her arms around Berthe's neck, and covered her with kisses. The two sisters wept with joy; the captain laughed, jumped, and clapped his hands like a child, and the future wife of the examining magistrate contemplated this touching scene with emotion.

Berthe had great trouble to tear herself from the embraces of her relatives to introduce her generous protectress. Madame Crozon knew her by name, and divined at once that she had contributed to the deliverance of the prisoner. The sailor did not understand at first, and it was necessary to explain to him with whom he had to deal, but he was then taken with a fit of enthusiasm which showed itself in effusions of joy and tenderness. He was about to embrace Madame Cambry, and as she drew aside, he caught her by the arm unceremoniously, and pulled her into the dining-room, where she was obliged to seat herself at the table between Berthe and the captain. While the latter overwhelmed her with jack-tar courtesies, she looked covertly at Berthe. She wished she could have questioned her as to the cause of this sudden change, but Berthe would not have been able to answer her, being ignorant of what had recently transpired. Berthe knew nothing of what had occurred since the husband's return, since the drama acted in presence of Gaston Darcy.

—an invisible spectator—and the somewhat fragile peace which had terminated the first act of the campaign opened against poor Mathilde by an anonymous denunciator. Madame Crozon knew more, however. She knew that she owed her repose to Nointel's able intervention, and she was burning with the desire to inform her sister of the various incidents which had occurred since the fatal night of the ball at the opera house. But her husband's presence closed her mouth. "I knew very well that Berthe was innocent," exclaimed the captain, bringing his fist down upon the table. "It took the magistrate some time to recognise the fact, but at last he has restored our little sister to us, and she will leave us no more. It is to you, madame, that we owe this joy; and I swear to you that Jacques Crozon, here present, will always be ready to throw himself into the water for you."

"You owe it, above all, to Monsieur Darcy," the widow hastened to say, wishing to so arrange matters as to relieve Mademoiselle Lestérel from the necessity of entering into difficult explanations. She did not wish to sadden this first interview by informing the sailor and his wife that Berthe's release was only temporary, and nevertheless it was necessary to refer to the step taken by the magistrate. She flanked the difficulty. "Monsieur Darcy," she continued, "has not yet come to a final decision respecting the affair which he has been charged with investigating, but his mind is made up, and he will not long delay taking steps which will completely discharge Mademoiselle Lestérel from an unjust accusation. Before reaching that point however, there are certain formalities to be observed which may take up some little time."

"No matter," exclaimed Crozon, "Berthe is free. That is all that is necessary. And it was too absurd to charge a child, who would not hurt a fly, with murder. I ask myself how an enlightened magistrate could have believed such calumnies."

"He was led into error by some unfortunate circumstances."

"Yes, I know; that poniard I brought back from Yeddo. A nice present that I made to my poor Berthe. They might very well have imagined that she had lost it."

Mademoiselle Lestérel cast down her eyes and began to turn pale. Fortunately, Madame Cambry came to her assistance. "Lost; that was the way of it," she said quickly; "lost on leaving my house just as the ball at the opera house commenced, and, by an extraordinary fatality, it was a woman who found it, and who made use of it to commit the crime."

"This woman is known?"

"No, not yet; but if she should escape justice, Mademoiselle Lestérel's innocence would be none the less established. She has been the victim of a plot hatched by some scamps, who will be discovered, I hope."

"It is I who will discover them. I am sure that the blow originates with a rogue for whom I am looking, and whom I shall end by finding. Ah, madame! I also have seen that a man must not trust in appearances. You won't be vexed with me for talking to you about sorrows which have poisoned my life, and which are at an end, God be thanked! On an anonymous denunciation I suspected my wife. I was sufficiently insane to believe that she had deceived me, and I was about to commit a great wrong, when chance brought me face to face with an old comrade, Captain Nointel. It was precisely he whom a scoundrel had designated to me as having been Mathilde's lover. We had a frank explanation, and everything was quickly cleared up. We recognised the fact that we

were both exposed to the persecutions of a hidden enemy, who had thought of making us destroy each other, and Nointel is now my best friend."

"Monsieur Nointel was introduced to me yesterday," said Madame Cambry, delighted with the turn that the conversation had taken. "He is very intimate with the nephew of Monsieur Darcy, my future husband, and I hope we shall often have the pleasure of receiving him."

Berthe looked at her sister, and, in looking at her, divined pretty nearly what had taken place during her captivity. Then she thought of Gaston, who, no doubt, had inspired his intimate friend with the happy idea of renewing his acquaintance with the sailor, and said to herself with a beating of the heart: "It was for me he did that."

"And you, sir," continued the widow, "I certainly expect that I shall see you again, and that Madame Crozon will also do me the honour to come and see me."

"The honour will be ours, and I promise you that we will often profit by the permission," said the whaleman, warmly. "Ah! madame, if you knew how happy we are now that our dear sister has returned, now that I am cured of my stupid jealousy! It is paradise here now, whereas it was hell before. I was mad. I had thoughts of murder. Will you believe it, the coward who wrote me anonymous letters had persuaded me that my wife had secretly given birth to a child, and I was seeking for the child to kill it? I should have killed the mother next, and have blown my brains out afterwards."

"Jacques!" exclaimed Mademoiselle Lestérel, in a reproachful tone, "you cause Mathilde great grief, and you forget to whom you are talking."

Madame Crozon was horribly pale, and Madame Cambry, who pitied her, was about to try to turn the conversation, but the furious sailor was well started.

"Why should I not recall the recollection of my foolishness?" he continued. "Let me proclaim aloud that I have been unjust, that I have made an innocent woman suffer, but that I have recovered from my errors, and my whole life shall be devoted to making reparation for them. Yes, I repent; yes, I ask forgiveness of Mathilde, of you, Berthe, whom I disowned—and of madame, whom I weary with the narrative of my misfortunes. But let us talk about something else," he added, abruptly. "When did you leave that abominable prison, my dear sister?"

"This morning," replied the young girl. "I had hardly reached home in the Rue de Ponthieu, when Madame Cambry came. And, shall I tell you, Jacques? it was she who encouraged me to present myself here. I did not dare to come, I feared the reception I should receive from you. It was my first thought to hurry here; but then I said to myself that you, no doubt, execrated me, and that you would, perhaps, drive me away; and I had resolved to spare Mathilde that grief. She had suffered enough."

"No, I did not execrate you—but I was assailed with vague suspicions: your conduct seemed inexplicable to me; I was irritated because my wife had been brought into the case; you told the magistrate that she had sent for you on the night of the ball—better than any one else, I knew that this was not true. I asked myself where you had been, what you had done during that unfortunate night, and then my suspicions returned to me——"

"Ah! sir," hastily said Madame Cambry, who saw the danger and had sufficient presence of mind to parry it by improvising a story, "Berthe herself was deceived. The woman who came in search of her at my house, and who has not been found, made use of Madame Crozon's name. Berthe thought that her sister had sent for her and followed this woman who, in the cab which they had entered together, tried to take her to the ball at the opera house."

"She was sent by that scoundrel, the anonymous letter-writer," exclaimed Crozon. "Ah! the wretch, what a pleasure I should take in killing him! And I who had imagined that Berthe had gone—I who always had that odious fiction about a child hidden by Mathilde in my head—I supposed——"

A violent ring at the bell interrupted the whaleman's exclamations, and put an end for a moment to the anguish of the two sisters, who trembled each time that Crozon returned to this delicate subject. "If that is Nointel coming to ask some breakfast of us he will happen well," said the husband, joyously. And he listened to a colloquy which was taking place in the ante-room between the servant and the person who had just rung the bell. "No," continued Crozon, "it is a woman's voice."

The talking had begun in a loud key and soon rose to a very high pitch indeed. Evidently enough the servant was disputing with some visitor whom she refused to admit. Soon she entered the dining-room all aghast, and said in a broken voice: "Madame, it is a woman who asks for Mademoiselle Berthe."

"A woman!" repeated Berthe, anxiously.

"Yes, miss, a woman who looks like a nurse, and carries a little child all wrapped up."

This led to a theatrical scene. The captain started like a whale which has felt the harpoon. Berthe turned pale, and her sister sank back in her chair. Madame Cambry looked at them both to try and divine the meaning of this domestic scene. "A child!" repeated Crozon, "a nurse! What brings her here?"

"Why, sir," said the servant, "she insists on seeing Mademoiselle Lestérel."

"It is all right, I am coming," murmured Berthe, while rising from the table.

The sailor was on his feet immediately and barred her passage. "I forbid you to stir," he cried.

And as Madame Cambry appeared to be preparing to leave, he added: "Remain, madame, you are not in the way."

By his manner, the widow realised that it was useless to insist, and she submitted, but began to regret having accompanied her young friend. Crozon abruptly opened the door, pushed the servant into the ante-room, threw himself into it, and returned almost immediately, dragging along a big woman who held a sleeping infant in her arms. She was somewhat taken aback, but soon recovered herself, for she was a robust-looking wench, and timidity was not one of her failings. "I salute you, monsieur, ladies, and all the company," she said, curtsying in the old style. Then, addressing herself to Berthe, she continued: "Good morning, mam'selle; I have come from your house; your door-keeper told me that you were for the moment at Madame Crozon's, No. 112 Rue Caumartin, and so I came straight here. Ah! I am very glad to find you, for my

man has for some time been leading me a dog's life to make me return to Pantin. I would not do so, seeing that I had promised to stay at Belleville, because you wanted to see the little one every day; but it couldn't last. Think of my expenses for living. We are not rich, and money was being spent all the time. As to getting to speak to you, or writing to you at that ugly house in the Faubourg Saint-Denis. I didn't think of it; I should have been afraid of getting you into trouble. Ah! they are watchful those judges are, and were I in prison, I should not like to have all my affairs told to them. However, things couldn't go on in that way; and if I had listened to my man, I should have taken the child to the foundling hospital. Finally, this morning, while chatting with the fruiterer, I learned that he had read in the paper that the judges were going to release the young lady who was at Saint-Lazare for that affair of the opera house. On hearing that, I abandoned everything, wrapped up the little one, and went straight to the Rue de Ponthieu. From the Rue de Puebla it is a good walk, and I had not even six sous to take the omnibus. That is why——"

"Enough," cried the captain. "Who intrusted that child to you?"

"Why, it was mademoiselle, of course. One doesn't need to be shrewd to find that out," said the nurse.

"When?"

"Not far from two months ago—and I have only received the money for one."

"Two months!" repeated Crozon, glancing furiously at his wife.

"Yes, two months; but the little one is a little older."

"Where was it given to you? Why were you applied to? I have the right to question you."

"You are a commissary of police, then?"

"Answer, I tell you. I want to know all. If you refuse to speak, or if you lie, I will have you arrested when you leave here."

"Arrested! Me! Ah! I should like to see that. I am an honest woman, do you hear me, and I fear no one. What have I done that I should be put in prison? My man works at a laundry at Pantin. It is he who drives the cart to take the clean clothes to the customers. As for me, I am a laundress, and sometimes I come to Paris with him. I must tell you that just after New Year's-day I was still nursing my last child; but I was going to wean it, when one Monday I went to mademoiselle's, who has had her washing done at our place for ever so long. 'Will you take charge of a child?' she said to me. 'It's all the same to me,' I answered her. 'Good! but you would have to live in Paris, for the suburbs are too far off. A lodging will be furnished you, all your expenses will be paid, and you will have forty francs a month in addition.' That suited me and my man too. We accepted. There was no harm in that. The next day I came back with my clothes, mademoiselle took me to a fine house in which she had rented a furnished room for me—you ought to have seen it? I was never so well lodged before in all my life. She tells me to wait for her, and an hour afterwards she brings me a little girl who was at least three weeks old, and just breathed. She looked as though she had been fed with the bottle, but she picked up as soon as I got her."

"And the mother came to see the child?" asked Crozon, panting with impatience and anger.

"The mother? I know nothing about her. I didn't ask who the child belonged to, seeing that that was none of my business."

Madame Crozon hid her face in her hands, but Berthe lifted her head and her eyes glittered. "You saw no other woman? That is impossible," said Crozon.

"As true as my name is Virginie Monnier, I have only seen the young lady who is there. Every day she came in a cab just as the clock struck noon; she took the little one away to give it some fresh air, as she said—I thought that funny, but it was her business and not mine—and at two o'clock she brought it back to me. It went on in that way till the beginning of the week when she made me move."

"Move?"

"Yes, one Saturday, after midnight. For almost a week she hadn't called. She sent a big woman, who looked like a servant, and who always asked if some men had not followed me when I went out with the child. And, indeed, on that Saturday, in the public garden, near the Rue de Lafayette, I was spoken to by a gentleman who wanted to know who the infant belonged to. I told him to let me alone, but he dogged my steps as far as the house. The big woman came in the evening, and I told her the story about the gentleman. On that, behold she tells me not to go to bed; but to hold myself ready to get away in the night, when she will come for me with mademoiselle and take me to another lodging."

"And they came!" said Crozon, in a hoarse voice.

"To be sure. Mademoiselle can tell you so. They came very late. I was asleep on a chair. I had to take the child, and to get away ever so fast. We got into a cab which was waiting below, and then off for Belleville! Rue de Puebla, a ground floor with a little garden. It was not as well furnished as in the Rue de Maubeuge, but it was nice all the same. No door-keeper. I had the key. The owner came the next day. She told me that the lodging was paid for for a month. I wrote to my man. It suited him, in a way, because it was nearer our place, but he thought the thing queer. As for me I thought to myself the young lady will come back to-morrow, and I shall have a talk with her. Ah! indeed, no one comes any more. I have never seen either her or the servant. And then, the next thing I learn on the Monday is that she has been arrested. What was I to do? The other one, I didn't know where she stayed, or her name, or anything about her. Well, I wait one day, two days, no news—she played dead. Then——"

"Shut up," interrupted Crozon; "it is no longer with you that I have to deal." And turning his back on the astonished nurse, he took a step towards his wife. The wretched woman tried to rise, but she lacked the strength to do so. However, Berthe, pale and resolute, went and took a place beside her. "You have heard," said the husband, coldly. "This woman's story is sufficiently clear. You have not been calumniated. You deceived me, and your sister was your accomplice. Ah! you took your precautions well! The nurse did not know your face. Your sister brought you your child every day. You were the mother for an hour—in the cab. Do you wish me to tell you when those interesting rides ceased? They ceased on my return, because you could no longer go out. I was there and you knew that, if I had allowed myself to be fooled by your statements, I had my eyes open none the less. And then, I had informed you that a stranger had denounced your infamies to me, that this man was seeking for the bastard whom you hid with so much care. You feared that he might surprise you. Berthe charged herself with throwing him off the scent. She is of your blood. She knows how to be

cunning, to lie ; nothing stops her ; she does not hesitate to compromise herself ; she disregards her reputation as a young girl ; she drags her father's name into shameful intrigues."

"Insult me, Jacques," murmured Mademoiselle Lestérel, "but do not calumniate Mathilde, and do not speak of our father. If he were living, he would know how to protect us, and would curse you, you who have no pity for us."

"Your mawkish words and hypocritical airs will no longer succeed in deceiving me. You cannot deny the child's existence. Will you deny that it was you who went after it, because you knew that it was all about to be discovered ? It was a Saturday—there was a ball at the opera house—you made good use of the night—you ended it in I don't know what doubtful house—you perhaps began it with a murder—I no longer believe in your innocence."

"I do not ask you to believe in it, and I deny nothing," said Berthe, looking steadily at her brother-in-law. It might have been thought that she was trying to exasperate him, so as to draw upon herself the storm which threatened Madame Crozon. "I deny nothing that I have done," she continued, "but I deny that Mathilde is guilty."

"On the day I returned to Paris, you swore before God that she was innocent, and I was insane enough to believe you. But this time your impudence is too great. Try to explain your conduct, then. Dare to insist that you did not act on your sister's account. If it was for another woman, name her."

"And if that were so, Jacques ; if I had exposed myself to so many dangers, to so many affronts, to save the honour of a friend, who is almost as dear to me as Mathilde, do you believe that I would betray her secret ? do you believe that your threats would make me commit a villanous action ? Yes, I know a woman who has had the misfortune to fall ; I have held my hand out to her, I have helped her, watched over her child. Would you reproach her for loving it ? Is it necessary that this child should pay with its life for the fault of its mother, who could not bring it up ? It would be dead if I had abandoned it. I saved it. It is liberal of you to make a crime of this. My conscience tells me that I have done right, and I am proud of having followed the inspiration of my heart."

The sailor started. Evidently the disdainful assurance with which Berthe replied to him produced some impression upon him. Perhaps he even commenced to doubt if she lied in stating that she had devoted herself to a friend. Nointel's energetic words returned to his memory, and he said to himself that this rogue, who had falsely accused the captain, might also have calumniated Mathilde. Berthe, on her side, felt that she had hit the mark ; but she could not hope that the victory would be hers in this decisive battle which she waged in defence of her sister. The struggle was too unequal. What could she do to sustain Mathilde in presence of the child, the living proof of a dishonour which she tried to throw upon some one unknown ? All was against the courageous girl, who prepared herself for the most cruel of all sacrifices. Meanwhile, Madame Cambry, encouraged by her benevolent attitude ; Madame Cambry, who might, by withdrawing, have spared herself the painful spectacle of this family quarrel, remained ; and it could be read in her eyes that she only awaited an opportunity to take the part of the weak. She waited for the husband's fury to abate somewhat. Plunged in gloomy reflections, with his arms crossed upon his chest, his head falling forward, Crozon seemed no longer

to see what was passing around him. The fat nurse was not greatly moved by his violent language, and she profited by this lull to approach Mademoiselle Lestrel. The child she carried smiled at Madame Crozon, who hardly dared to look at it. "See, madame, how pretty she is," exclaimed the nurse. "She does not know you, and yet she wishes to kiss you."

The white forehead of the little one almost touched Madame Crozon's lips. The faint voice of a stolen kiss was scarcely audible. "Wretch!" shouted the husband, seizing a knife from the table, "you are its mother. I am going to kill you both."

But Berthe threw herself in front of him, to cover with her body the poor creatures that this furious man was about to strike. "You shall not touch my child," she said firmly.

"Your child!" exclaimed Crozon; "you dare to say that that child is yours?"

"Yes, I dare," replied Berthe. "I am its mother, and I shall know how to defend it."

"Unfortunate girl! it is your dishonour you proclaim!"

"I know it; I know that I work my own ruin in confessing a weakness which I would give my whole life to undo; I know the fate which awaits me. I might have hidden my shame. You compel me to publish it. May God forgive you! As for me, I will expiate it and not complain, for I shall, at least, have saved Mathilde from your fury."

"What is there to prove to me that you are not lying to save her?"

"What! you still doubt? What then is necessary to convince you? Do you require that Madame Cambry should tell you of the unhopèd-for happiness I renounce? You have just inflicted upon her the sight of an odious scene. Are you going to compel her to swear that I am unworthy to marry an honourable man? Will you oblige my child's nurse to repeat the narrative you have already listened to? You have forgotten then that she knows but me, that I alone have seen the child! You have forgotten also then, that I have been accused of a crime, and that I refused to justify myself! Do you think that if my honour had not been at stake, I should have resigned myself to the terrible punishment which awaited me, rather than tell the truth? And," added the heroic girl, not without a little hesitation, "do you believe that Mathilde would have allowed me to sacrifice myself for her?"

She had reserved this argument till the end, but the risk was a perilous one, for she plainly foresaw that Madame Crozon would not readily bring herself to accept the sacrifice. She looked at her, she looked at the child, and her eyes expressed an eloquent prayer. They said to her sister; "You have not the right to immolate your child, and your husband will kill it if you contradict me." And to forestall the reply she feared, she continued, turning towards her brother-in-law: "Mathilde is innocent, and I read in her face that she would like to sacrifice herself for me, to accuse herself of the fault I have committed. What would it be, then, if she were guilty?"

Madame Crozon sobbed aloud. Maternal love had stifled the cry of her conscience, and her voice was not raised in protest. The husband threw the knife upon the table and said in a bewildered manner: "Leave us. I wish to be alone with my wife. Take away that child."

The dismayed nurse was dying with the desire to leave, and Madame Cambry asked no better than to follow her, for she was greatly troubled, and was also anxious to question Berthe. But Berthe hesitated about

leaving her sister at the climax of a terrible conjugal crisis. However, a glance addressed to her by Mathilde, made her to decide to do so. She realised that the explanation would be less stormy if it took place without witnesses, and, especially, if M. Crozon no longer beheld the child, the sight of which exasperated him. Besides, to sustain the part of a mother, which she had so generously taken, she ought not to leave the child. "Jacques," she said, gently, "I shall never again reproach you for the evil you have done me. You yielded to a fit of anger which you already regret; of that I am sure, for I know that you have an excellent heart. But you are calmer; reason has returned to you. I no longer tremble for Mathilde, and I confide her to you. I do not ask you to forgive me my fall. I only ask you not to curse me, for I am very wretched."

"Go!" murmured Crozon, more moved than he wished to appear.

"Do not seek to learn how I succumbed. That is a secret which will soon die with me, and which Mathilde will never know. Adieu." With this word, which sufficiently indicated that she would not try to see her brother-in-law again, Berthe threw herself upon her sister's neck and embraced her tenderly. Their tears mingled, and, without uttering a word, they understood each other. The nurse, anxious to get away, was already outside the door. Madame Cambry cordially pressed the wife's hands, bowed coldly to the husband, took the young girl's arm, and went out with her. M. Crozon did not attend them to the door.

"Ah! my God," exclaimed the nurse as soon as they were on the stairs, "how furious that man was. If mine were like that, I should leave him to himself. To want to kill the little one because she smiled at his wife. Did one ever see?" Then, suddenly changing her tone: "Then, in that way, this big fine girl is yours, mademoiselle? Oh! truly, I didn't suspect it—but you needn't cry for that. You are not the first who has been unfortunate, and you won't be the last. We will bring her up, the poor little brat, and, if you will leave her with me, I will keep her willingly, for now I am no longer worried about the payment of my dues."

Madame Cambry at once understood the purport of these last words, and wished to spare Berthe, who was choking, the trouble of replying. "Here are a hundred francs, my good woman," she said, quickly. "Return home, tell your husband that the child's mother has been found again, and await our visit, which will not be long delayed."

The nurse was enthusiastic in her thanks, and did not wait to be begged to take her leave. She made Mademoiselle Lestrel kiss the rosy cheeks of the little one, who had again fallen asleep with a smile on its lips, and went off downstairs.

Madame Cambry and the young girl descended after her, without uttering a single word. The place would have been badly chosen for an exchange of their impressions. They entered the carriage again, the widow gave orders to be driven back to the Rue de Ponthien, and hardly had the footman closed the door, when she said in an agitated voice: "Berthe! it is not true, is it not so?"

"No," murmured Berthe. "I am lost, but Mathilde is saved."

"You are sublime. And you will be recompensed for your devotion. The order of discharge will be signed this very day."

Mademoiselle Lestrel made a sign of indifference. "I will go immediately to see Monsieur Darcy to tell him——"

"Tell him nothing, madame, I beg of you, out of pity for my unfortunate sister."

"Your sister is no longer concerned, since you have carried abnegation to the extent of declaring that this child belongs to you. You will repeat that declaration before Monsieur Darcy, and——"

"Monsieur Darcy will not believe me."

"No, certainly not. If he could for an instant suppose that you had fallen, it would be very easy for him to assure himself to the contrary. Monsieur Crozon, who has been absent from France for two years, might be deceived in the matter, but I, who have not passed a week without seeing you, Monsieur Darcy himself, who has often met you at my house, we know very well that it is impossible."

"Monsieur Darcy would not believe me, you admit that. So he would be obliged to inquire into my sister's conduct."

"Why? What does it matter to your judge whether you were acting for her or for yourself? He would only occupy himself with verifying the employment of your time during the night of the ball at the opera house. And nothing is easier now. This nurse will be interrogated. She will declare that you arrived at her house at one o'clock or two o'clock in the morning. Never will an *alibi* have been better demonstrated. The woman who came in search of you at my house will remain to be heard. You will designate her——"

"No—no—that would be to betray a secret which——"

"Which Monsieur Darcy would divine without any trouble. And I repeat to you, my dear Berthe, that Madame Crozon will not be compromised, whatever may happen. You do not distrust me. Tell me who this woman is. I can promise you that Monsieur Darcy will ask her but one thing. He will ask her where she went with you after your departure from the Avenue d'Eylau. To the opera house, without doubt?"

"Yes—she waited for me in the cab."

"That is what I thought. He will also ask her how long you remained at the ball, and where she took you afterwards. Her deposition will confirm that of the nurse, which already perfectly agrees with the fact of the domino being found on the outer boulevard, near the street she lives in. All will be finished this evening, if you tell me the name and address of this indispensable witness. Besides, would it not be better to avoid a search for her, to prevent the police setting their officers on foot; they would, perhaps, not act with discretion?"

"You are right, madame; it is necessary that you should know all. This woman is a servant in the house where the child was born, and where it remained until I found a nurse. She was very devoted to my sister. I had further recourse to her services later on—after my brother-in-law's arrival. I feared being followed, and sent her to see the nurse in my place. Her name is Victoire, and she is in the service of a Madame Verdon—Rue des Rosiers, at Montmartre. She will easily be found; but should Monsieur Darcy question her as to the person who was confined in that house——"

"Fear nothing of the kind; Monsieur Darcy is free to conduct the investigation as he thinks best. He has no account to render to any one, and he will perfectly understand your position. I thank you for having had confidence in me. You will not have reason to repent of it, for tomorrow nothing will remain of that absurd accusation. But forgive me if I approach another subject—a subject which is more delicate. I am your friend, that you know, Berthe; your sincere friend. You will not, then, be vexed if I talk to you frankly. Very well. I fear that Monsieur

Gaston Darcy will suffer by your heroic determination ; for I ought not to hide from you that his uncle will think himself obliged to repeat to him what I am about to inform him of."

"If his uncle does not repeat it to him, I will tell it to him myself. I even desire that he should learn it from me, and from no one else."

"I plainly recognise your fidelity in that. But it would be better, however, to leave that task to Monsieur Roger. A magistrate's word would have more authority than yours. And Monsieur Roger would know how to tell everything without compromising your sister or leaving the shadow of a suspicion upon you."

"A suspicion do you say? If I thought his nephew distrusted me, I should prefer to die a hundred times."

"Gaston loves you distractedly, and there is no love without jealousy. Who knows but he will be creating chimeras for himself in regard to that child?"

"Then I should bitterly regret having caused him a great sorrow, but I should not retract what I have already said. So that my sister may live, it is necessary that my reputation should die. I wish everybody to think that I have fallen. That is the price of the salvation of Mathilde and her child."

"You forget that you are going to marry."

"Marry! I no longer think of that. I did deceive myself for an instant, and trusted that Monsieur Gaston Darcy would overlook my sad adventure. I allowed myself to hope that he would not put faith in the slander of which I have been the victim, that he would not admit that I had stained my hands with blood. But now, it is no longer a murder which will be imputed to me; it is forgetfulness of my duties; it is degradation in the eyes of the world; it is infamy. Monsieur Darcy could not raise me out of it by choosing me; and even should he persist in wishing to marry me, I would refuse to become his wife. ~~I was~~ I was accused unjustly, certainly; but it suffices that I was accused to render me unworthy to bear his name."

"You exaggerate, my dear Berthe. None but he, his uncle, your sister, your brother-in-law, and myself will know that, carried away by an impulse of generosity, you recognised as your own a child which did not belong to you. I do not speak of that nurse, who will live far from your circle, and whom you will see no more."

"I shall see her, for I shall not abandon Mathilde's child. I am resolved to take my sister's place in connection with it; to take it with me, as soon as it is old enough to do without the care I could not bestow on it; to bring it up as though it belonged to me. I wish all the world to believe that I am the mother. You understand now, madame, why I can no longer marry Monsieur Gaston Darcy."

"Will you refuse to receive him?"

"If I were to receive him, it would be to release him from his promise. But I fear lest my courage should fail me, and you will crown all your kindnesses by charging yourself with informing him that I cannot accept the honour he wishes to confer upon me."

"If you should absolutely require it, I would fulfil that sad task, but I doubt if, even after listening to me, he would consent to lose you. Believe me, Berthe, do nothing hastily. A day will come, perhaps, when you may regret having refused a worthy man who loves you. Suspend the carrying out of your decision, at least, until I have seen Monsieur

Roger Darcy. I am now going to drive to his house, and if I do not find him there, I shall go to the Palais. It is absolutely necessary that I should see him this morning, for I wish you to be free without any restrictions, without any sort of conditions, this very evening. After this visit I will return, and we will deliberate together as to the best course for you to follow. It is agreed that Monsieur Gaston shall not present himself without me, great as is his desire to see you. You will, therefore, not have to close your door to him. We have now reached the Rue de Ponthieu; I am going to leave you for a few hours. Rely on me."

The brougham stopped, and Berthe alighted, after having kissed her protectress. "My God," she murmured, "grant that this generous friend may be happy; save Mathilde, save the child, and take my life."

IV.

Two days after the grand ball, given at the mansion in the Avenue Ruysdaël, the Marchioness de Barancos, who, among her other eccentricities, claimed to be an expert sportswoman, set out for her estate at Sandouville, where she expected a number of guests, including Nointel, who did not care to miss so favourable an opportunity for carrying out his plans, for he suspected that the trip had been arranged for him. The marchioness had already spoken to him about it as early as the evening of their interview in the box at the opera house, and on the day after the ball he had received a formal invitation, written in the most gracious and most pressing terms.

After the scene of the sleeve button he had given to his partner at the close of the cotillion, the enterprising captain had not concealed from himself that he had been defeated; and that he knew no more in regard to the marchioness's guilt than he had known before. He knew even less, for he doubted now what, on the evening before, had seemed evident to him. Madame de Barancos' language and manner had disconcerted him; she had turned pale at the sight of the accusing button, but she had seized it with the impassioned violence of a woman who receives a pledge of love from the man of her choice. Had she wished to get possession of a damaging piece of evidence, or to compromise herself by placing an object worn by Nointel near her heart? The emotion shown on her face might be interpreted in more than one way. You turn pale from surprise or from fear, but you may also turn pale from joy, when the joy is sudden—when, for instance, you receive an unexpected, but ardently-desired declaration.

So Nointel was, more than ever perplexed. Mademoiselle Lestérel was assuredly innocent, but that was no reason why the marchioness should be guilty. This was what Darcy refused to listen to; and the captain, who had no hope of bringing him over to his opinion, was not very anxious to see him till the situation had resolved itself in one way or the other. And thus he took no measures to meet him, and Darcy, fully occupied with the released prisoner, did not make his appearance at his friend's rooms after the festivities at Madame de Barancos'. Nointel accordingly started for the shooting party given by the marchioness, without knowing anything about what had taken place between five or six persons, to whom existence had assumed a new aspect. He had not seen Gaston, the latter's uncle, or Madame Cambry, and his last visit to the Crozon

household had been paid several days before. His plans thus underwent no modifications.

Sandouville is some fifty miles from the Parc Monceaux, and two leagues by road from the station of Bounières, on the Western railway line. The captain had taken an afternoon train, with the intention of arriving at the château an hour before dinner. Of this he had duly notified the marchioness in a gallantly-worded note. The *battue* was to take place the next day, and the marchioness had left Paris the evening before, taking some of her guests with her, and leaving the others free to come just in time for the shooting. Nointel left the train at Bounières, and he found there a footman in amaranth and gold, who recognised the expected visitor by his appearance, and came respectfully to place himself at his orders. In the yard of the station stood a brougham, harnessed to two bay horses, and an immense break, destined to carry the luggage. Nointel, an experienced traveller, had brought but a single trunk, ingeniously arranged for the reception of all kinds of clothing, including shoes, hats, and necessary toilet articles. But he understood the utility of the break on seeing four enormous boxes—a supplementary consignment from the superintendent of the marchioness's toilet, and he accordingly judged that the company must be more numerous than he had at first supposed. "Whom has she invited?" he asked himself, as he entered the brougham. "No one from the club, I suppose, for I went there yesterday, and the privileged ones would not have failed to boast of their invitations. The marchioness is certainly no fool. She divined that those comrades would annoy me."

The horses went like deers, and the road was as level as a garden walk. At the end of twenty minutes the captain saw the lights of the château gleaming at the end of an avenue of elms. It was night, and a very dark night, so that it was impossible to note the exterior arrangements of this seigniorial residence; but he saw that it was of superb appearance. Nothing feudal, however; a vast and handsome modern structure of the Louis XIII. style, preceded by an immense courtyard and surrounded by fine woods.

Received by a valet, Nointel was conducted to the room reserved for him. He learned that Madame de Barancos dined at eight o'clock, and that the guests assembled before dinner in the grand hall of the château. He had time to make his toilet, and so he proceeded at once with that important operation. He might have dispensed with his toilet articles, for he found in a charming little room contiguous to his bed-chamber all the utensils and all the perfumery imaginable. Madame de Barancos wished that her guests should feel at home. All the arrangements had that object in view. Thus each apartment had its library of choice books, suited to the presumed taste of the occupant. Historical memoirs, treatises on political economy, and similar works, for serious men; novels and light literature for the young. Nointel had been treated to a mixed regimen: the catalogue embraced from the complete works of Alfred de Musset to the report of the Prussian Staff on the war of 1870. Poetry and tactics combined. At half-past seven the valet, whom the captain had dismissed, reappeared to conduct him to the grand hall of the château, situated in a wing of the building some distance from his room. On the way there, Nointel noted that the walls of the corridors were covered with tapestry, which would have shown to advantage in a museum, and that the staircases were hung with pictures, the least valuable of which cost at least three hundred louis. After numerous turns, our strategist reached

a door as high as the porch of a cathedral, and guarded by a servant in full livery, who threw it wide open, and announced in a stentorian voice; "Monsieur the captain Nointel."

The latter looked around him for the marchioness, and failed to perceive her. Most of the people present were men, there being but three or four old ladies of haughty mien, who resembled portraits by Velasquez. Not one face the captain knew; at least he did not distinguish any at the first glance. As near as he could judge all these people were foreigners. "One would swear," he thought, "that she has expressly invited none but supers, so as to be able to act with me a play with two characters."

The vast and lofty hall was of the most imposing aspect. Wainscotted with old oak to two-thirds of its height, ceiled with rafters crossing each other, pierced with ogival windows with panes of the old style, it seemed to have been constructed for use on solemn occasions. On the walls panoplies and trophies of the chase were displayed, and at the farther end there was a colossal chimney with suits of armour of the middle ages on either side. Above the mantel-shelf appeared the Barancos' escutcheon, with lions as supporters, and a huge coronet. In spite of the mediæval decorations the guests were occupied in amusing themselves with the most modern games. There was a bouillotte table in full activity; the dowagers had organised a whist-party, and a young hidalgo dealt monte for five or six of his compatriots. Nointel bowed, passed among the groups without mingling with them, and leisurely approached the fireplace, where a man of somewhat lofty mien, whom he had noticed at the marchioness's ball, was warming himself. He was about to address him some commonplace courtesies, as a matter of duty, when a door opened at the end of the hall, exposing to view a room resplendent with lights and crystal. Madame de Barancos, still more resplendent, appeared upon the threshold. She wore a short dress of black satin, with a long-pointed body, trimmed with sable, and showing her lovely shoulders. At her wrists and ears she displayed diamonds, which glistened with less fire than the black pupils of her eyes.

Nointel went forward at once to deliver a compliment appropriate to the occasion, but just as he was about to speak, he made such an extraordinary discovery that he stood mute with surprise. He recognised, in the form of a brooch on the marchioness's bosom, the sleeve-button which she had so quickly snatched from him at the close of the cotillion. It made a sorry figure beside the precious stones with which the marchioness was adorned, and never, in Nointel's memory, had such an ornament been displayed above a low-necked dress. Madame de Barancos was too well versed in these matters to have sinned from ignorance; and if she were guilty of such a solecism of the toilet, it was certainly not without intention. Nointel knew this very well, and it was because he knew it that his astonishment was unlimited. This unexpected exhibition disconcerted all his foresight and put all his eloquence to flight. The marchioness thus displaying this convincing piece of evidence!—why it was a climax: the climax of audacity, unless, on the contrary, it was the most pronounced proof of her innocence. She did not allow the captain time to recover from his surprise. "Welcome!" she said, offering him her hand. "You don't know how impatiently I awaited you. If you had not come this evening, I believe I should have returned to Paris to-morrow morning."

"What, madame," said Nointel, more and more surprised, "you would have abandoned your guests?"

"My guests would have shot and dined very well without me. They are my country-people, and I have arranged them to suit myself."

"It seems to me, in fact, that I am the sole representative of France here."

"You are sorry for it?"

"Oh, no; on the contrary, I am infinitely obliged to you for not having invited certain persons of my acquaintance."

"Monsieur Prébord, among others; is it not so? I was very careful not to do that, although he humbled himself very much in his desire to come. I even left aside your friend, Monsieur Gaston Darcy. He would have diverted you, and I intend that you shall occupy yourself with no one but me." With this unvarnished declaration, the marchioness passed on, leaving Nointel somewhat nonplussed, and went her way distributing her princely smiles to her subjects. The games had ceased as soon as she showed herself, and the players grouped themselves about their hostess to compliment her. Evidently all these people were ergoles from Havana, accustomed to play the courtier to Madame de Barancos, whenever it pleased her to surround herself with her vassals. They had, however, an air of grandeur, and did not seem at all embarrassed by the part assigned to them. "She must have had them come from Cuba for the express purpose," thought Nointel. "Parasites recruited in Paris would not be so majestic. But I see neither Simancas nor Saint-Galmier. Can she have had the gracious idea of sparing me their company? Ah no, here they come."

The general had entered by a little door between two panoplies, in a corner of the hall, and now advanced with stately step, flanked by his friend, the doctor. A badge in diamonds glistened on his black coat, and his button-hole was decorated with numerous foreign orders. Saint-Galmier had contented himself with putting a ribbon round his neck, from which hung a cross which might very well have been received by him from the sovereign of the Sandwich Islands. Nevertheless, they looked amiss among the real hidalgos convoked by the marchioness. At the first glance, they might have been taken for gentlemen; at the second, they were suspected of being sharpers. Nointel remarked that they were received very coldly, and that Madame de Barancos scarcely noticed them.

The doors of the dining-room had remained open, and a major-domo now appeared and announced dinner. The marchioness came and took Nointel's arm—he had somewhat expected this favour—and headed the procession. The captain had had a large experience of ceremonious banquets; but he was not the less amazed on crossing the threshold of the dining-room, where the table was spread in the midst of flowers. The service was of Dresden porcelain, the table-cloth of China satin, woven with flowers. On the plates lay fine napkins folded in the shape of cravats, and fastened with silver-gilt pins bearing the names of the people for whose use they were intended. Each guest had nine glasses, punctuated with gold, before him, and two ice-pails for wine and water. In the centre, on a high pedestal, there was a large *jardinière* full of tea-roses and violets, with *upimosa* falling from each side in wreaths, which ran along the table to other *jardinières* placed at either end. Moreover, the display of dishes and set pieces was something prodigious, and on any

other occasion, the captain would have been delighted with so promising an exhibition, for he esteemed culinary art at its true value ; but, for the moment, good cooking was the least of his cares. Madame de Barancos' compatriots were in no better condition than himself to appreciate such a repast. They came from a country where an air on a mandoline serves for supper after a dinner consisting of a cigarette and a cup of chocolate. Simancas and Saint-Galmier were the only persons present capable of doing justice to the merits of the culinary artists who had prepared the feast. Nointel saw them ~~wisper~~ ^{whisper} together, eye the dishes which formed the first course, and nod their heads with a satisfied air. He was placed directly opposite them, and was enraged at not being able to treat them as he would have liked to do ; however, he relied upon having his revenge a little later.

The marchioness had seated him on her left ; the right hand side being occupied by a Spaniard of high rank, the same who had had the honour of escorting her to supper at the ball. And on the other side Nointel was flanked by a duenna whose severe aspect would have held a zouave at bay. "Your neighbour only speaks the language of the land of Cid, and mine is deaf," said Madame de Barancos to the captain ; "you can talk as though we were both on the summit of Mont Blanc. By the way, you know that I ascended it last year?"

"I did not know it, but I am not surprised to learn it," replied Nointel while tasting some turtle soup *à la* Chesterfield. "You must love summits, precipices, everything which is inaccessible."

"No ; everything which is perilous."

"Was it this love of danger which led you to invite General Simancas and his tool, Dr. Saint-Galmier?"

The marchioness blushed slightly, and said in an easy manner. "You find them dangerous ; you do them great honour. I don't invite them ; I patronise them."

"That is still worse."

"You say that because they are displeasing to you. They have no great attraction for me, but I consider them inoffensive, and I know that they are judged severely. Now, I have an instinctive tendency to defend those whom society attacks. I am on the side of the oppressed."

"Is it necessary, then, to please you, that a man shall have been rejected by a club, or have been shown the door of some drawing-room of good standing?"

"Perhaps so ; majorities are always in the wrong in my eyes, and I am never of their opinion. I love rebels."

"Fra Diavolo, then?"

"Why not? I come from Don Quixote's country. Don't you remember that he one day delivered some poor wretches who were being led to the galleys?"

"And who, in gratitude for his kind offices, threw stones at him as soon as his hands were free."

"You are insupportable. One would imagine that you had determined to tear away all my illusions. Look here ! I myself imagined that you were capable of loving as I might wish to be loved ; that you despised that stupid and cowardly enemy called opinion, but you seem to have imposed upon yourself the task of assuming the manner of a commonplace citizen. You ought to say those things in the voice of Monsieur Prudhomme, that prototype of everything commonplace. Why don't you

add that what you are eating is delicious? That would be quite in conformity with the usages of good company, and society would find nothing to reprove in it—that society which refuses to tolerate independence.”

“If you knew how little I care for what it thinks, you would treat me with less severity. Why don’t you put me to the test? You would soon learn to know me better.”

“Take care. I am capable of taking you at your word, and of proposing something extravagant to you.”

“Try it,” replied the captain, looking steadily at the marchioness, who did not lower her eyes.

There came a spell of silence. Trout à la Johannisberg was being served, which the Spaniards tasted with the tips of their teeth, and which Saint-Galmier relished highly. The marchioness steeped her red lips in a glass of sherry wine, and Nointel set to studying the bill of fare. “I invited you,” said Madame de Barancos, “and I did not even think of asking you beforehand if you were a sportsman.”

“Does it please you that I should be one?” retorted the captain, gaily.

“I don’t ask you for insipidities. I wish to know if shooting amuses you.”

“I like shooting at a *battue* less than a stroll in the woods or on the plain alone with my dog. I do not care much for diversions which are regulated in advance like the evolutions of a ballet. You will not reproach me with being wanting in frankness.”

“I shall see if you will be frank to the end. Why did you come here?”

“To say to you what I was not able to say at the ball.”

“You think, then, that you said nothing to me,” asked Madame de Barancos, placing one of her tapering fingers on the gold button which she had taken from the captain.

“Yes, I think I spoke—I even think that you replied to me: as speak and reply the effendis and sultanas in the East—the effendi sends a bouquet full of allegories, and the sultana replies with another—it is the language of flowers, a delightful but prolix language—I aspire to explaining myself in a less poetical but more precise idiom.”

“The *battue* will not commence till noon. Would you like to take a ride on horseback to-morrow morning? The woods are superb at this season. It froze yesterday, and the branches of the oaks are covered with icicles. You will see that I shall finish by converting you to poetry. First of all, however, I am anxious to show you my forest. Your horse will be saddled at nine o’clock. And now, try to find a subject which will lead to a general conversation. Our aside has lasted too long.”

“Really? You also sacrifice yourself to proprieties?”

“No; but if you continue, my guests will infallibly commence talking Spanish, and you will take no pleasure in that. Help me to retain them in France.”

Nointel asked no better. He knew now all that he could learn in a chat during dinner, and besides, he perceived that he was being discreetly watched from the other side of the table. Simancas had good eyes, and Saint-Galmier sharp ears. Whatever Madame de Barancos thought of these two rogues, it was quite useless to attract their attention by prolonging a private explanation. The marchioness had already opened a conversation, respecting theatrical matters, with a young Cuban lately

landed in France. Nointel found it agreeable to address himself in the first place to Saint-Galmier, and to ask him his opinion on an American dish which had just been served: crabs cooked in rice, sprinkled with saffron, which made them look as though they were lying on a bed of golden sand. This was sufficient to lead the conversation by unforced transitions into the usual channels on such occasions. A little politics, a smattering of sport, a suspicion of literary criticism, the whole seasoned with society scandal, and a few echoes from the green rooms. All these foreigners were men of good society, well informed on Parisian matters, and everything passed off in the pleasantest way possible.

However, when the marchioness took Nointel's arm to return to the grand hall again, he was greatly surprised to hear her say to him: "I am going to leave you. I need to be alone. It is odd, but it is so. We will see each other again to-morrow morning. Mount your horse at nine o'clock." A few words to the dowagers; a few shakes of the hand with the men, and that was all. The hostess went her way out of the room, leaving her guests to amuse themselves as they could. "Now this is something prodigious," thought the captain to himself. "Where the deuce is she going? To pray for the soul of Madame d'Orceval? She is quite capable of it, I'm sure."

The marchioness's guests must have been acquainted with her habits, for they did not seem in the least astonished at this precipitate retreat. The dowagers returned to their whist; the young men organised a game of *baccarat*; Saint-Galmier commenced playing chess with a hidalgo of fine appearance, and Simancas engaged in earnest conversation in Spanish with the personage who had occupied the seat at the right of the marchioness at table. Nointel was invited to become one of the party at *baccarat*, but he politely excused himself. He had no thought of tempting fortune at cards. He was reflecting upon the marchioness's strange disappearance, and the ride on the following morning. He thought of these matters so much, that the idea occurred to him of imitating the hostess and retiring. A good cigar, smoked in solitude by the fireside, tempted him much more than the company of the hidalgos. So, after walking for a few moments from one end of the room to the other, he gently proceeded to the great door which opened on the main corridor. He there found two or three footmen, ready to show the guests their way, and at his request he was escorted to his apartment, where everything was prepared to enable him to pass a pleasant evening.

A bright fire was burning in the fireplace of the little sitting-room, which preceded the bed-chamber. On the ebony table, inlaid with brass, stood candelabra with lighted tapers. There were newspapers, reviews, and almanacs, and three boxes of excellent cigars. On a side-board, of old oak, Nointel found a muscovite samovar, a tea-caddy, and some china cups, with a simple and commodious arrangement for making coffee, and, in some rock crystal flacons, some French brandy, West India rum, and kummel from Russia. All the wants of a bachelor fond of solitude anticipated by the forethought of an intelligent servant. This servant, attached to the captain's person, was waiting in the ante-room, and asked for orders for the next day; and Nointel, on dismissing him, announced that he intended to ride out at nine o'clock precisely. After this he arranged himself for the evening, donning a jacket and morocco slippers, and establishing himself in a huge arm chair, so as to be able to philosophise at his ease. But it was written that his meditations were to be disturbed at the very com-

ment. Scarcely had he thought over the incidents of the evening than some one knocked discreetly at the door. He rose quickly, ran to open the door, and, to his utter surprise, he beheld the disagreeable face of General Simancas. "What do you wish with me?" he bluntly asked the Peruvian.

"I wish to talk with you on matters of importance," replied Simancas, without becoming disconcerted, "and I beg of you to grant me the favour of an interview. I know that you do not seek my company, but I am sure that this time you will not regret hearing what I have to tell you."

Nointel hesitated for a moment, but he said to himself that sooner or later he would have to come to a definite understanding with this rogue, and that it would be better to have it over at once. "So be it," he said; "come in. I am willing to listen to you, provided that you will be brief, and, above all, come right to the point. I am not disposed to receive you for the pleasure of chatting."

"Don't be afraid. I have travelled a great deal in America, and know that time is money. I propose to make the most of the moments you grant me."

On this promise, Simancas glided into the room, took a seat which had not been offered him by the captain—who had again thrown himself into his easy chair—and commenced in these terms: "You remember, sir, a certain conversation which we had a few days ago at my friend Saint-Galmier's?"

"Perfectly," replied Nointel, somewhat surprised by this opening.

"Neither have I forgotten it, and I ask permission to remind you that, at the end of that chat, you were pleased to place before me certain conditions which I hastened to accept. I furnished you, at the time, with all the information you asked of me in regard to Madame Crozon's conduct during her husband's long absence, and I promised to abstain from all proceedings in connection with Monsieur Crozon."

"The word *proceedings* is charming," said the captain, ironically.

"Finally," continued the Peruvian, without a frown, "I promised that you should shortly be invited by Madame de Barancos. You admit, I suppose, that I have kept all my engagements. Monsieur Crozon has received no more anonymous letters, and, in place of one invitation, you have received two."

"It remains to be seen if it is to you I owe them. But I will not cavil on that point. What are you driving at?"

"I wish to say to you that our first treaty having been faithfully executed on both sides, I have come to propose the conclusion of another."

"I don't understand."

"You will understand; I am going to play with my cards on the table. The time for reticence has passed by. You know my projects, and I should only be a fool if I tried to hide them from you, for you would not be deceived. You know very well that I have introduced myself by force, or nearly so, at the marchioness's, and that, by the same means, I have introduced that dear doctor. You know that, and you are too intelligent not to have divined that if I have obtained these two concessions, it is because I possess a secret which it would suffice for me to divulge to ruin the marchioness in public opinion. I am frank, as you see."

"Frank even to cynicism. Continue,"

"That secret Saint-Galmier and I alone know, and it may make our fortunes. The marchioness possesses many millions, and would willingly give two or three to purchase our silence. We have not yet demanded them of her, because we are anxious above all to have her patronage. I do not conceal from myself that we need to be elevated in the eyes of the world. That is done. We were seen at her ball; she showed herself with me in the Bois de Boulogne; all Paris will know that we have just spent a few days at her château at Sandouville. She can no longer break off her relations with us without provoking a disturbance, which she will certainly avoid. Accordingly we shall soon be in a position to approach the great question of the remuneration which is due to us. In exchange for a sum which will make us rich and will not impoverish her, we will offer her certain guarantees; we will even engage, if she positively exacts it, to sail back across the ocean, although it goes hard with us to leave France. And she will accept the bargain, don't doubt it."

"Very good. To what end, if you please, do you expose this pretty plan of blackmailing to me?"

"Why! it is very simple. Our plan has the greatest chance of success, but you can prevent it from succeeding."

"Really? Well, now, you astonish me."

"Your astonishment will cease if you will listen to me. I shall teach you nothing by telling you that the marchioness has a very strong liking for you. She no longer even takes the trouble to hide her feelings, and among all her guests there is not one who does not believe that you are, or will be, her lover. That is also my humble opinion, only I suppose that you aim higher."

"Ah! then, according to you I wish——"

"To marry Madame de Barancos; that does not appear to me at all doubtful, and I think you are quite right. I even think that you will succeed in marrying her, if you set about it in the right way. Now, if she accepts you for a husband, it will infallibly happen that you will call upon her to show my friend and myself the door."

"I admire your perspicacity."

"Say rather my frankness. You commence, then, by demanding that we be driven away, and I admit that, opposed to you, we are without defence; you have a hold on us, and can do us a great deal of harm. But if Madame de Barancos, led on by the passion you inspire in her, forgets that she is at our mercy, if she should break with us, then, I ought to warn you, it will happen that, having no longer any inducements for caution, we shall publish what we know about her; and I affirm to you that the secret once published, you yourself would at once decline to marry the marchioness's millions."

"In that case, I also should be without any motives for caution, and should relate to the proper parties what I know regarding you."

"Naturally. And the rupture of our treaty would be followed with deplorable results. Saint-Galmier and I would be obliged to cross the frontier; your marriage would fall through, and God only knows what would befall the marchioness. Would it not be better for us to come to an understanding?"

Nointel trembled with rage, and but little was needed to induce him to throw the scoundrel who thus addressed him outside. But he reflected that there was always time enough for that, and that the opportunity was a good one for leading Simancas to expose his game completely.

"Come to an understanding?" he said, haughtily. "Why? I have no need of you."

"Perhaps you have," replied the Peruvian. "Suppose, for instance, that Madame de Barancos has but a mere fancy for you, and that she is not disposed to give herself a master. Widowed has charms which she fully appreciates, and nothing proves that she thinks of renouncing them. It is even probable that she prefers to remain free. If she has that idea, how will you compel her to marry you? I know her character, and you have already been able to judge of it. She will demonstrate to you that you will be perfectly happy without surrendering your independence, that marriage kills love, and many other things. What will you say in opposition to that? That you absolutely wish to become her husband? that would be confessing that you care more for her fortune than for herself. Whereas, if you possessed, like me, her secret——"

"And if I threatened her to take advantage of it, she would refuse me nothing. But, it occurs to me, why don't you make use of this talisman to compel her to marry you—you, Don José Simancas, General in the service of the Peruvian Republic?"

"You are making game of me. I know exceedingly well that Madame de Barancos would brave every danger rather than accept me for a husband. With you, however, it is different. You would only have to wish it to decide her, if you know how to use the weapon which I am ready to supply you with—on very acceptable conditions."

"Let us hear the conditions?"

"I will acquaint you with the marchioness's secret on receiving your promise that, within one month after the celebration of your marriage, you will pay me the sum of two million francs; and I will pledge myself, in writing, to return to America with Saint-Galmier as soon as I have received it, and never to set foot in Europe again. If we should take it into our heads to return, you would always have a guarantee against us, since you could denounce us to—the proper authorities, as you politely said just now. That is all, sir. I await your answer so that I may retire."

The captain was choking with indignation, and had great difficulty in restraining himself while Simancas was developing this insulting proposition. But his mind, as usual, had remained lucid, and he began to ask himself if he would not do well, even in the marchioness's interest, to draw from this scoundrel an unreserved disclosure. If the Peruvian and his accomplice had seen the marchioness strike Julia d'Orceval, it only depended on them to ruin her, and, by the rebound, to save Mademoiselle Lestérel. Nointel asked no better than to save Berthe, but it was horribly repugnant to him to cause Madame de Barancos' ruin. Would it not be better to warn her, to urge her to take flight? Would it not also be better to know how matters stood before he went any further in the dangerous game he was playing? "Yes," he said to himself, "it is necessary that I should have the courage to allow this wretch to believe that I accept the loathsome bargain he has dared to propose to me. And if he informs me that he was a witness of the murder, I will tell the marchioness tomorrow that I will grant her time to leave France, to disappear for ever, providing she consents to write a letter containing the confession of her crime, which I will put in the hands of the examining magistrate a month after her departure. Mademoiselle Lestérel is already at liberty; she can well wait a month for the confession of the culprit to establish her innocence." In reasoning thus Nointel yielded to the feeling which bore

him towards Madame de Barancos; and, in truth he was somewhat excusable for wishing to save from the assizes a woman whom he would have adored if she had not been a criminal. "Before replying to you," he said, bluntly, "I wish to know the value of this secret, the importance of which you proclaim so loudly. If, for example, it concerns any love intrigue the marchioness may have had, it would be no revelation to me. I am not ignorant of the fact that she was the mistress of that Goly mine, who was your accomplice."

Simancas changed colour. He had not expected this retort. But he replied, without much hesitation: "It concerns a revelation very much more important."

Nointel had been marvellously served by his instinct in throwing Goly mine's name in the Peruvian's face; the latter had promised himself to give up but a part of his secret. This calculation found itself upset at the very first blow, and Simancas was obliged to go further in the way of disclosures. Encouraged by his first success, the captain pressed him vigorously. "You admit, then," he said, "that Goly mine had been the marchioness's lover?"

"Yes," replied the Peruvian; "but no one knew it excepting Saint-Galmier and I."

"You are mistaken. Others know it; I, for example. If all your secrets are like that one, they are of no value; and Madame de Barancos would be very foolish to purchase your silence at the price you claim for it."

"It seems to me, however, that if a threat were made to publish the letters she wrote to the count——"

"She would merely go to the public prosecutor in Paris; she would tell him that you wished to blackmail her; would put herself under his protection; and the least that could befall you would be expulsion from France. I will add, that if I should decide to conclude the bargain, the first condition I should make would be that those letters be surrendered to me."

"There would be no difficulty about that."

"You have them all, then?"

"I have one; that is sufficient."

"Where are the others?"

"I do not know," replied Simancas, not without hesitating a little.

"You do not know? Do you wish me to tell you? I am very well informed, I give you warning; so well informed, indeed, that I have divined the secret which you think you alone possess; the great secret which places the marchioness at your mercy."

"You will allow me to doubt that. If you had divined it, you would already have curtailed our interview."

"Why so? Your conversation greatly interests me. It is possible, however, that although I have divined what is in question, I may have many explanations and much information to ask of you. Look here, I will start you on the way. On the night on which Madame d'Orceval was assassinated at the opera house ball, you and your friend Saint-Galmier occupied the box next to that in which the crime was committed."

At this new blow Simancas lost countenance entirely. "No doubt," he stammered, "I was there. But what connection do you see between that circumstance and the secret?"

"I am going to tell you. A young girl was accused of that crime, but

her innocence has just been recognised. She was to be temporarily released on the day before yesterday, and the order of discharge will not be long delayed. Nevertheless, Madame d'Orcival was killed by some one—by a woman apparently, since it has been proved that she received none but women in her box. Now—follow my reasoning closely, I beg of you—Madame d'Orcival had been the mistress of your friend Golymine, who had also been, as you have just told me, Madame de Barancos' lover. This Golymine hanged himself at Julia's a few days before the night of the ball. He had letters from the marchioness. You possess one of them, it seems. It is quite natural to suppose that the others fell into Madame d'Orcival's hands, whether they were confided to her by the Pole, or whether she found them on his person after his death. It is quite as natural to suppose that Madame de Barancos, warned of this fact—you follow me, do you not?—to suppose, I say, that she risked everything to recover them. Now, I leave you to finish."

"Allow me!—all that does not prove——"

"That I have divined your secret. In fact, I have not divined it. It was you who confided it to me."

"How so?"

"Why, by confessing that you held the proof of a correspondence between the marchioness and your rascally friend. With this point of departure, which you furnished me, I had no trouble in discovering that the marchioness had great interest in ridding herself of Madame d'Orcival, and that you knew, from having witnessed it, that she did rid herself of her." And, as Simancas, quite embarrassed, remained silent, and moved uneasily on his chair, the captain continued, looking at him steadily: "You see, that I am as able as yourself, and that I could do without your revelations. Come now! admit that I am right."

"I might very well admit that, but it would not enable you to profit by my secret. Conjectures are not facts."

"And you alone were the witness of that principal fact, you and your acolyte, Saint-Galmier. Agreed. Nevertheless, I also saw something, and I have no motive for withholding from you what I saw, for I do not seek to traffic on the information I possess. I saw Madame de Barancos enter the opera house on the night of the ball. I recognised her perfectly, in spite of her lace veil. I spoke to her; I gave her my arm to protect her against some impertinent fellows who pressed her too closely, and I left her at the entrance to the corridor of the first tier, within fifty paces of box No. 27, the one in which Julia was murdered. I know no more about it, but that is quite sufficient, and if I wished to go and relate my adventure to the examining magistrate, begging him to apply to you for supplementary information——"

"You will not do that!" exclaimed the Peruvian.

"Not if you give me the facts. And, in truth, you would do very wrong to refuse them to me, at the point we have reached."

"But, admitting that I possess them, will you promise, if I divulge them to you——"

"I promise nothing; it does not suit me to promise, since you are already in my power, while I shall never be in yours. But you must understand that I don't care to crush you, and that it is entirely to your interest to be on good terms with me."

"So be it!" said Simancas, driven into his last entrenchments; "I trust to your conscience. When I have informed you of what I know,

you yourself will set the value of my silence. Besides, I know with whom I have to deal, and I am sure that I shall not have to repent of having confided in you. Learn that we did not see, but that we heard all that took place in the box. I recognised the marchioness's voice, and, in addition to that, during the discussion which took place between her and Julia, the Kutter called her several times by her name. This discussion was lively, and related to some letters addressed by Madame de Barancos to the count. The name of Golymine was also uttered—and frequently. We could not distinguish every word, but we were, nevertheless, able to follow the conversation very closely. Finally, the letters were restored and the marchioness left the box——”

“What! that is all?”

“She went out, but returned a minute later. She had no doubt bethought herself that Madame d'Orcival might have kept back a letter, and that it would be prudent to silence her forever. Then the scene was a very short one. Madame d'Orcival said: ‘What! madame, it is you again!’ The marchioness, instead of replying, struck the blow with that poniard-fan which the other probably had in her lap—there had been some talk concerning it during the first interview. We heard a stifled cry, two or three groans, then nothing but the noise of the door opened and closed rapidly. The marchioness had fled, and the door-opener had observed nothing. The blow had been struck in the little room behind the box. Then, we went away——”

“Without troubling yourselves about the unfortunate Julia, who was dying behind the partition. My very sincere compliments! You are surprising. Any one else would have cried out ‘Murder!’ You and your worthy friend the doctor went quietly away and at once conceived the ingenious project of operating on Madame de Barancos.”

“Where would have been the good of denouncing her?” said the Peruvian, cynically. “In handing her over to justice we should have caused a great scandal, and we should not have restored Madame d'Orcival to life.”

“That is evident. It is true, however, that an innocent person was accused; that she was thrown into prison; and that she would probably have been condemned, if, by an extraordinary accident, her innocence had not been demonstrated. However that is an insignificant detail. I return to your discovery. You, I suppose, presented yourself at the marchioness's as early as the next day.”

“Well, yes. In such a case one cannot act too soon.”

“And how did she receive your overtures?”

“Somewhat badly, I must say. I had, however, proceeded with extreme delicacy. Instead of using big words, or speaking of crime, murder, and the assizes, I merely informed Madame de Barancos that I had recognised her in box 27, that I had heard the noise of the quarrel which had taken place between her and Madame d'Orcival; finally, that having formerly been very intimate with Golymine, I knew the cause of that quarrel. She realised at once that I knew everything, and she herself proposed a composition.”

“Then you stated your conditions?”

“Oh! not at all. I did not wish to frighten her. I merely asked to be received by her, with Saint-Galmier, and this I obtained without difficulty. We are in the camp, and the time has come to strike a great blow, for I feel that the ground on which we walk is not very solid.

The marchioness tolerates us impatiently, and would very much like to regain her independence. I even suspect her of meditating a fugue—a sudden departure for the West or the East Indies. That flight would greatly interfere with our projects and yours, and we wish to prevent it. To do that there is but one means—that is, to tell her plainly what I only hinted at: to declare to her that we were witnesses of the murder, and to give her her choice between immediate arrest, or the payment, also immediate, of two little millions—a trifle for a woman who has eight or ten of them. And it is because we find it necessary to bring the matter to a close that I have come to propose to you to act in concert with us. Union is strength. If you consent to lend us your co-operation, we shall succeed without a doubt; if we are divided everything may fail. Why should you not charge yourself with being the bearer of this ultimatum; with hurling at the lady this declaration which must assure us the victory? You will have abundant opportunities to-morrow to chat with the marchioness alone. Why should you not profit by them to state an ultimatum—a demand for marriage, skilfully brought forward after a conversation regarding the crime at the opera house, Golymine and your humble servant—perhaps you would not even find it necessary to dot your i's. Madame de Barancos is a woman who understands a hint, and she would come to terms at once, for her tastes accord with her interests in marrying you, and we would trust you implicitly for the rest, for we should be quite sure that once married you would not like your wife to remain under the threat of a denunciation, and you would hasten to rid yourself of us by paying the price agreed upon."

"And that is all?" said the captain, coldly.

"Yes. You accept?"

"I ask twenty-four hours for reflection."

"Then, to-morrow evening——"

"To-morrow evening I will acquaint you with my decision. And I rely on your refraining in the meantime from acting or talking. That is a condition *sine qua non*. If you do not observe it, I shall use the weapons I hold against you without pity. You might denounce Madame de Barancos, but I swear to you that I would be beforehand with you, and would go to Monsieur Darcy, the examining magistrate, and relate to him the interesting dialogue I heard at the door of your friend Saint-Galmier's office."

"You will not have that trouble," rejoined the Peruvian, with vivacity. "The doctor and I will observe the most complete neutrality until to-morrow evening. We will not say a word to the marchioness, and we will even remain away from the shooting party."

"That is all right. Now, please to leave me to myself," concluded Nointel, rising.

Simancas did not dare to try to prolong the interview. He did not conceal from himself that he was going away defeated; that the captain, who now possessed the great secret, had promised nothing. But this Peruvian judged others by himself, and, basing his hopes on the intentions he had ascribed to Nointel with respect to the marchioness, he believed that all would turn out for the best, and in accordance with their reciprocal interests. "He will come to it," he said to himself, as he slowly took his way back to the hall, "and if he doesn't come to it—evil will befall him—I shall resort to great measures—and I will make myself ready now for any event."

While the rogue was thus quickly retreating, Nointel, giving unequivocal signs of violent agitation, was striding up and down in the little sitting-room where he had flattered himself that he would pass a quiet evening. "I can no longer doubt it," he said between his teeth, "it was she who killed Julia, and, if I don't prevent it, these scoundrels will pillage her in the first place, and then denounce her, for they won't content themselves with two millions. They will want everything, she will refuse, and then—then she will be lost. (And I who was about to love her! I am not quite sure that I don't love her already. I should like very much to know what Gaston would do in my place—but I shall not consult him—let him save Mademoiselle Lestórel, I shall be delighted—and I will help him to serve her with all my heart—but to-morrow morning, without further delay, I will warn the marchioness. I will not have her go to the galleys."

V.

THE air was cold, the sky clear, and the ground, hardened by the frost, resounded under the horses' tread. The trees were leafless, and the snow still silvered the ferns faded by winter.

Along the forest road the marchioness and Nointel were riding side by side, followed at a distance by two grooms. Madame de Barancos rode a black mare full of spirit, which she managed with marvellous ease; Nointel, a tall bay of great speed. They were going at a walk, and had not yet exchanged a word. One would have said that they both felt that this early ride was to decide their destiny, and that they disliked to commence with customary trivialities a conversation which might unite or separate them for ever. And, indeed, the captain was very much perplexed, and still more excited. To accuse a woman of an abominable crime, and advise her to fly to escape punishment, is not an easy matter, when that woman is beautiful, when she is a marchioness, when you have good reasons for believing that she loves you, and when you fear that you love her. In spite of his experience and adroitness, Nointel did not know how to commence. On her side, the marchioness, usually so prolix, showed herself that day reserved even to coldness. It was certainly not because she was indifferent, for her blood mounted to her cheeks and her eyes glistened. Never had she been so beautiful. "What a pity," thought Nointel, as he looked at her stealthily.

And his face so well expressed what he thought that the marchioness, shocked perhaps by this mute declaration, vigorously lashed her mare, who started off like a cannon-ball. Nointel, somewhat surprised, gave rein to his horse, and started after his eccentric hostess. The road was wide and straight, but a hundred yards further on came a steep, wooded hill, which seemed hardly practicable for riding. Nointel maintained his distance, and thought that this mad race would cease at the bottom of the declivity, where a fence, some five feet high, barred the way. He was mistaken. The marchioness cleared the obstacle like an accomplished horsewoman. It was necessary for him to do the same; and beyond the fence he perceived that the road became a mere woodcutter's path, strewn with large stones, intersected with deep ravines, and often barred by young saplings. However, Madame de Barancos did not stop for so little. She went on at full speed, without caring for the branches which lashed her face. Nointel, for want of room to gallop by her side, followed her, fretting a little at

the strange fancy which led her to take an almost inaccessible hillside by assault. When they arrived, almost at the same time, at the summit of the slope, the captain held in his horse, and, on turning round in his saddle, he perceived the two grooms, who had dismounted, and were trying to lead their horses by the bridle through the coppice, so as to flank the fence. "If it is a *tête-à-tête* she wants," he said, between his teeth, "she has it as completely as she could desire. Her people will never succeed in joining us. I hope at least that she will halt here at the summit." But no, the path followed the other and more precipitous incline of the hill, and down went Madame de Barancos at break-neck speed. "Ah! she wishes to kill herself, then," exclaimed the captain. "Very well, there will be two of us." And he at once followed her down the perilous declivity. He had seen worse bits of road in Mexico and Algeria, but then he had been mounted on Barbary horses, which are sure footed, and have the same instinct as the chamois for climbing among rocks, and he mistrusted the legs of his half-breed, who was mainly accustomed to galloping on sandy roads. There was, however, no way for him to get out of it, and he went through it creditably. Vigorously upheld by a wrist of iron, the Anglo-Norman did not stumble, though he did not succeed in overtaking his companion in the descent.

When Nointel reached the foot of the hill, he saw the marchioness seated on a mossy rock, and her panting mare standing by a willow, with its reins upon its neck. Hard by there was a pile of blocks of granite, sloping down to a brook, which murmured over the pebbles; some old oaks surrounded a circular open space, carpeted with furze; while tall birch trees, with white trunks, peeped out like phantoms from the dimness of the underwood. "What scenery for a romantic situation!" murmured the captain, springing lightly to the ground. "Assuredly, it was not unintentionally that she brought me here." Then, approaching Madame de Barancos, who received him with a frown, he said, with sincere emotion: "You frightened me terribly. It is a miracle that your mare did not stumble on that break-neck path. Why do you thus play with your life?"

"My life. I don't care for it," replied the marchioness, with a gloomy air.

"You must allow me to doubt that."

Madame de Barancos made a gesture of indifference, and continued: "I know what you are going to say to me—my fortune, my title, my youth, my beauty. What do they matter, since I am not loved?"

"And if I told you that I love you," exclaimed Nointel, who was not prepared to receive so direct an attack.

"You have already told me that twice; but you have not yet proved it to me."

"What proof do you exact, then?"

"A sacrifice which you have not offered me, and which I shall never ask of you. Oh! do not question me; I shall refuse to answer you. But I can inform you of what I have resolved to do. We shall see each other no more. I am going to leave France, and shall never return."

Nointel started. "I know very well why she wishes to go away," he thought. "Come! there is no longer a doubt. It was she who killed Julia."

"I cherished a fancy," resumed the marchioness. "I dreamed of flying to the depths of some solitude in the country of the sun; of hiding

myself there; giving up this worldly existence, which tires me, and living in the desert with the lover I had chosen. It was an idle fancy; I shall go alone."

"Go away! What obliges you to do that? Why go so far in search of happiness?"

"Because I am jealous; because I wish the man whom I love to be mine only; because I suffer too much in Paris, where pleasure is taken for love; because I have already been betrayed there."

"You have, then, already loved?"

"With fury. You are astonished that I admit it? You don't know me. Yes, I have loved, and the man I loved cowardly abandoned me. I cursed him; God punished him. God did not favour me by curing me of love. I believed, I hoped, that my heart was dead; that I should no longer live but to divert my thoughts, to try and forget the past. I was mistaken. I love again, and I love without hope, for you will never understand me. You think you love me, because I please you. But you do not love me, and if I were to yield to you, I should condemn myself to horrible tortures. It were better that we should separate, for I feel that I should not have the strength to stop myself on the incline to which I am gliding in spite of myself. It was to tell you this that I brought you here. My language surprises you; you take me for a crazy woman. It is true. I am crazy, for, unlike your Frenchwomen, I do not know how to hide what I feel. I do not know how to calculate my words and disguise my weaknesses. I loved you the first time I saw you, and I tell you this, as I told you that I had had a lover, as I would tell you that I hated you if you afterwards betrayed me."

While the marchioness launched forth this vehement tirade, Nointel cut a somewhat sorry figure. It was not that he was ignorant of the art of speaking the ardent language of impassioned love. He would have found no difficulty in replying to any other lovely woman thus throwing herself at his head; but, in spite of himself, he thought of the box at the opera house, of the two rascals who with one word could send the marchioness to prison, and he said to himself that the time had arrived to reply to her burning declaration with a serious warning, to throw ice upon this volcano, to curtail these transports by questioning like a judge and advising as a friend. By what transition could he arrive at that?

"And if I were to tell you," he commenced; "if I were to tell you that I am jealous of the past? If I were to tell you the name of this lover who betrayed you, and that his name is detestable to me?" This abrupt attack was precisely the contrary of a transition, but the result was the same.

The marchioness sprang to her feet, crossed her arms upon her bosom and said, haughtily: "Since you know it, pronounce it then, this name."

Her cheeks had become pale, her eyes flashed lightning. She was superb. Nointel admired her, but did not weaken. "Your lover," he said, "was named or was known as Count Goly mine."

"That is true," replied Madame de Barancos, coldly. "You despised him, did you not? Do you believe, then, that I esteemed him? I loved him, that was enough. And I do not disown—I never disown the man whom I have loved."

"You are heroic, for that man was a scoundrel."

"What do you know about it?"

"I know that he unworthily took advantage of some letters you wrote to him."

"Who told you that? Who told you I had been his mistress?"

"Who? A rogue whom you submit to because he surprised your secrets. He came to me yesterday to propose to sell them to me."

"And you bought them of him?"

"No. He disclosed them to me. He hopes that I shall consent to make use of them and share the profits with him. I did not deceive him. I wished to compel him to unmask, so that I might save you."

"Save me!" said the marchioness, disdainfully. "You think then that that scoundrel could ruin me! You think that I should not have the courage to brave the world's opinion! It matters little to me if he everywhere proclaims that Golyanine had been my lover. Afterwards, as before, I should walk with my head erect."

"Then why do you receive General Simancas and Dr. Saint-Galmier, two intriguers whom Paris is already astonished to see in your society?"

"Because I had a momentary weakness; because I hoped to rid myself of them by paying them. You inform me that they dare to threaten me. I thank you. I will drive them away. They can say of me what they please; I shall not even take the trouble to contradict them."

"Even if they go to the examining magistrat?" asked Nointel, after a short silence.

The marchioness started, but did not lose countenance, and replied in a tone of assurance: "Explain yourself more clearly, for I do not understand you."

"Madame," continued the captain, much more moved than she, "I swear to you that if your honour and your life were not at stake, I would be silent; but you force me to speak."

"Speak, then! I am waiting."

Nointel thought he had found an indirect way of approaching the terrible question: "That button," he said, "that sleeve-button which you took from me while waltzing—"

"Well?"

"Do you know where it was found?"

"That button was found!" exclaimed the marchioness. "It was not yours, then?"

"You know very well that it was not," said Nointel, astonished by the self-control she displayed.

"If I had known that it did not belong to you, I should not have placed it on my heart," continued Madame de Barancos, tearing, with a sudden movement, a fine chain from her neck. The accusing piece of jewellery hung at the end of the golden thread; she threw it, rather than handed it, to the captain. "Take it back," she said, angrily. "It matters little to me now where it came from. But you trifled with me, and you will inform me of the object of this silly joke."

"It was not a joke; it was a test."

"I understand less than ever."

"This button was picked up out of the blood near the corpse of Julia d'Orcival."

"How horrible! And you caused me to wear it! That was a very mean action on your part."

"I thought it belonged to you," said Nointel, looking the marchioness in the face.

She turned pale, but it was not from fear, for she quickly replied :
 "Then you accuse me of having killed that woman?"

"God forbid that I should accuse you ! I would give ten years of my life to acquire the certainty of your innocence."

"Then you suspect me. And why? Because this piece of jewellery bears the initial of my name? Admit that this is absurd."

"If that were the only indication——"

"There are others, then? Let me know them. I wish to know every thing."

"Have you forgotten that you took my arm at that ball at the opera house at which the murder was committed?"

"Ah! you recognised me? I suspected it. It is true. I was at that ball."

"I left you at the entrance of the corridor of the first tier of boxes on the right."

"That is also true. And the box in which that unfortunate woman died was exactly on that side. That does not prove that I entered it."

"You oblige me to tell you that you were seen there."

"Ah! now I understand all. That scoundrel, Simancas, has told you that he heard my voice in that box——"

"Did he lie?"

"No; I was there, I admit it, and will tell you why I went there."

"Simancas has told me."

"He told you, then, I suppose, that I went to demand of Julia d'Oréal some letters that she had in her possession—some letters I had written to Count Golyminé. That is the truth. But he did not dare to tell you that I assassinated that woman?"

"You are mistaken, madame. He told me that, and he will repeat his statement to the investigating magistrate, if you do not accept the conditions he will offer you."

"And those conditions you advise me to accept?"

"No; for Simancas and his partner will be insatiable. When they have extorted from you a part of your fortune, they will exact the rest. I advise you to fly." The blood rose to Madame de Barancos' brow, but she did not reply, and Nointel, who took her silence for an avowal, continued thus: "And it was to give you time to leave France that I feigned to accept the ignoble proposals made me by that scoundrel. I exacted of him a promise, and I have the means of compelling him to keep it. It only depends on me to send him to prison. He will not talk as long as he can profit by the secret which places you in his power. But should you drive him away, he would then have nothing to lose, and, having nothing more to gain by remaining in Paris, he would cross the frontier, and then denounce you. It is necessary that you should leave France before he does."

"He addressed himself to you—he chose you for his confidant!"

"He thinks that I aim at marrying you because you are rich, and that I would resort to any means to attain my end. I had a great desire to throw him out of the window; but I thought of you, and I knew that an explosion would spoil all. It was better to listen to him and warn you. He did not suspect my project, for he did not suppose that I loved you for yourself——"

"You loved me, you say—and yet you judged me guilty—and when I spoke to you just now of my dreams of happiness in a desert, you

thought, no doubt, that the passion I displayed was but a pretext to disguise the true motive which obliged me to resort to flight. You are silent. I have divined the truth."

"And supposing I had thought that, do you think that I could have torn from my heart a love which would be the misfortune of my life? Yes, I think you are guilty; I think that, carried away with anger, you struck the woman who had been your rival, who threatened you, who insulted you, perhaps—for you had not premeditated the murder, since the weapon did not belong to you. I think you have committed a crime; but it is one of those crimes which do not disgrace one."

"And if I did not commit this crime," interrupted Madame de Barancos; "if I proved that my hand has not been stained with blood, that I have nothing to reproach myself with—nothing but a fatal imprudence?"

"If you prove that, I would beg of you to choose me to crush those wretches who accuse you, to defend you against those who might dare to speak against you, and when I had reduced your slanderers to silence, I would follow you to the end of the earth, should it please you to live with me there."

"I should not ask of you that sacrifice; for I could not exculpate myself as regards the murder, save by confessing a fault which the society in which we both live does not forgive. The magistrate who receives my avowal will know that I was the mistress of Count Golyminé; he will know that my letters——"

"What! you will——"

"I wish to tell everything. To-morrow, I will ask Monsieur Roger Darcy for an audience. Is it not he who has charge of this affair?"

"No doubt; but——"

"If, from weakness for which I blush, I had not so long delayed presenting myself before him, I should have spared myself much grief and many humiliations. You would not have suspected me, and, perhaps, an innocent person would not have been accused; for she is innocent, is she not, that young girl who was arrested? She has been released, I have been told."

"Yes, after several days' confinement."

"I swear to you, that if I was silent, it was because I thought her guilty. If I had thought she was innocent, nothing would have stopped me. I should have hastened to her judge, and related to him all I saw. But I thought, on the contrary, that my evidence would only overwhelm her."

"What did you see, then?" exclaimed Nointel, who began to lose himself amid Madame de Barancos' incidental sentences.

"Listen to me," said the marchioness, letting herself fall back on to the rocky seat from which she had risen. "You shall hear all that Monsieur Darcy will learn from me to-morrow, and when you have heard me, you shall judge me." The captain, greatly moved, stood in front of her, with one hand holding the bridle of his horse, and the other convulsively clutching the golden button found by Madame Majoré. The marchioness's favourite mare stretched out her neck and gently rested her head on her mistress's knees.

"I have told you that I was betrayed by the only man I had yet loved," commenced the marchioness, "betrayed for a woman who trafficked with her beauty. It almost killed me, and those who then

saw me astonish Paris with my extravagant whims never guessed that I was trying to drown my cares. My connection with the count had remained secret, and after our separation I do not believe that he had the meanness to reveal it to any one. The wound he had caused me by abandoning me had scarcely healed when the news of his death struck me like a thunder-bolt, and I had hardly recovered from the blow when I received a letter from this Julia d'Orcival, a letter in which she told me, that an accident—what accident? I know nothing about it as yet—that an accident had placed in her hands my letters to the count, that she was disposed to return them to me, and that she would do so at the approaching ball at the opera house, in box 27. I hesitated for a long time, but I had everything to fear from a woman whom no scruple would probably deter from injuring me were I to refuse to submit to the humiliation she chose to impose on me. I finally determined to go to the ball, and I went. The appointment was made for half-past one o'clock. I was punctual, although it was necessary for me to take great precautions to leave my residence without being seen. My old steward alone was in the secret of my nocturnal excursion. He charged himself with bringing a cab to the little garden gate, and he watched there to open it on my return. It was half-past one when I entered the opera house; a little later you left me after an incident with which you are acquainted. I had, however, arrived too early, for the box-opener who watched over the box told me that she had orders to admit but one person at a time, that a domino had been received by the occupant half-an-hour before, that she was still there, and that I should have to wait till she went out. I then believed that I had been hoaxed, and I was about to go away, for I was enraged at the impertinence of this creature, who made me come to the ball to laugh at me; but almost at the same time the door opened, and I saw the woman who had been received before me pass by."

"Tall, slender, spare, in a very plain domino," said the captain, who was thinking of Berthe Lestérel.

"No," replied the marchioness, after reflecting a little; "she whom I saw was, on the contrary, of medium height, and wore a domino trimmed with rich lace."

"That is strange," murmured Nointel.

"I noticed her all the better since I saw her twice," continued Madame de Barancos. "The way was clear, the box-opener admitted me, and I found myself alone with Julia d'Orcival. She wore a black and white domino, and had unmasked herself to chat with the person who had preceded me, and perhaps also that I might recognise her. I had often seen her in the Bois. It was certainly she. On seeing me, she put her mask on again, and, leaving the little room where she was, she advanced to the front of the box. I committed the mistake of following her there, and of addressing a few words to her which were heard. Simancas, who had barely had a glimpse of me in former times at Havana, was in the next box with another rogue. He recognised me, and you know how he takes advantage of that discovery. Perhaps Julia d'Orcival had made me show myself on purpose to compromise me, for she quickly returned to the room in the rear, and I seated myself beside her. I then noticed that she held a Japanese fan in her hand, and she affected to draw the poinard concealed in the sheath as though she wished to let me see that she was prepared to defend herself. I had no thought of attacking her. I only thought of recovering my letters, and as I supposed that she reckoned on selling them

to me, I had brought a large sum in bank-notes and commenced by offering them to her."

"She refused them?"

"Most angrily, and the interview at once took a violent turn. She dared to deride me. She came very near insulting me, and twenty times I was on the point of leaving. But when she saw that I was about to rise, she changed her tone; she swore to me that she had no intention of injuring me, although still making me feel that it only depended on her to ruin my reputation. May God forgive the poor unfortunate creature! She was a genius in wickedness and cunning. It was not until I had submitted to her perplexing words for nearly an hour, that I understood what she had in view. She imagined that her last lover had left her to pay court to me."

"What! Gaston Darcy?"

"Yes, your friend; and she had taken it into her head to obtain from me a promise not to marry him. I received this proposition with such an air that she did not insist on it. With her diabolical intelligence she understood at once that she was on the wrong tack, and that Monsieur Darcy was indifferent to me; after that the conference rapidly drew to a close. With some little ceremony she returned me the letters, swearing to me that she had not kept a single one, and hastened to leave. It was then, just as I set my foot in the corridor, that I almost ran against the domino who had preceded me in the box. I had seen her leave it; this time, I saw her enter it again."

"What!" exclaimed Nointel, "this woman returned, and an hour had elapsed since she had left the box?"

"Yes," replied Madame de Barancos. "And I suppose she had been waiting for some time in the corridor. She stood there leaning against the wall, watching for my departure. As soon as she saw me, she approached the box-keeper, spoke to her in a low voice, and entered."

"You are certain that it was the same person—the person whom Julia had received before you?"

"Quite certain. I recognised her by her height, her form, her gait, and the lace on her domino."

"Then it was she, undoubtedly, who killed Madame d'Orsival."

"I have always thought so, and when I learned that a young girl had been arrested, I thought that no mistake had been made, that it was she who had succeeded me in the box."

"Mademoiselle Lestérel! but I thought you knew her. Hasn't she often sang at your house?"

"Yes, in grand concerts with twenty others. I had never sufficiently noticed her to recognise her, especially as this woman wore a thick veil which hid her face from me."

"And you did not hear her voice when she spoke to the box-opener?"

"No, I was in a hurry to get away. I did not stop. But the box-opener heard her; she heard me also. Why hasn't she been questioned, and confronted with Mademoiselle Lestérel?"

"All that has been done. Nothing sensible could be drawn from her. I questioned her myself."

"You! what interest had you to meddle in this lamentable affair?"

"Gaston Darcy is my intimate friend, and Gaston Darcy loves Mademoiselle Lestérel."

"Poor young man! how much he must have suffered! She has been released, did you not tell me?"

"Released temporarily ; but the proceedings will be abandoned, for it has been proved that she was no longer at the opera house at the time the crime was committed."

"She had been there, then ?"

"Yes. There have been fatalities in this strange affair. Mademoiselle Lestérel was accused because the Japanese fan belonged to her. And I accused you, because I thought the sleeve-button which was found near Julia's corpse was yours."

"Who found this button ?"

"The box-opener ; and I am anxious to inform you how it passed from her hands to mine, how I was led to suspect you, madame, you whom I had but seen a few times at a distance. I have just told you that Gaston Darcy loves Mademoiselle Lestérel. He loves her to that degree that he had determined to marry her, and, although I have not met him for some days, I know that his resolution has not changed. Well, he asked me to help him in proving this young girl's innocence, and I undertook this difficult task enthusiastically. We opened a sort of investigation. By chance I knew the box-opener ; I questioned her closely—on the day after the ball—the very-evening on which I spoke to you for the first time."

"In the proscenium-box, where your friend brought you ?"

"Yes, and I was greatly surprised to see you there. I knew that you had passed a part of the night before at the masquerade ball, because I had met you there—and the idea came to me——"

"That I showed myself at the theatre so that I might not be suspected of having gone to the ball. You divined that."

"I had also been struck with another fact. I had dined, by chance, at the Maison-d'Or with Simancas, and he had boasted of having been received by you on that same day."

"That was true."

"It seemed strange to me that your house was open to a man of such doubtful reputation. I sought for an explanation of the favour you had been pleased to grant him——"

"And you said to yourself that no doubt he also had seen me at the opera house ball. You were not mistaken. At four o'clock that Sunday, the rogue presented himself at my residence, on the pretence that he had a very important communication to make to me. I saw him, and realised into what hands I had fallen. He commenced by informing me that Madame d'Orceval had been assassinated. This news upset me, for I was still ignorant of it. Then, profiting by the embarrassment into which he had thrown me, he impudently declared to me that he had recognised me in that woman's box ; that he had heard my conversation with her, and would publish what he knew abroad if I did not accept his conditions. He exacted that I should receive him ; should show myself in public with him ; protesting that he would not take advantage of those favours, that his only object was to reinstate himself in the opinion of society. He made some allusions to a former connection which he had had with Count Golyfine. I yielded."

"And the same evening, at the Café Tortoni, you publicly endured his company, and that of his acolyte, Saint-Galmier."

"Yes, and I endured it elsewhere also. I once took him to the Bois, in my carriage ; I invited him to my ball, to my shooting-party. But I was already tired of his exactions ; I was resolved to tolerate them no longer ; and I swear to you that if I had imagined he accused me of having

assassinated the woman d'Orcival, I should already have had him thrown out of my house."

"Then, he had not told you——"

"Nothing of the sort. He limited himself to skilfully representing all the serious trouble which might befall me if it were known that I was in that box a few moments before the murder. He told me that I should be ordered to appear before the magistrate, obliged to confess that I had kept an appointment made by Julia d'Orcival to receive some letters written by me to a lover; he even hinted that I might be troubled in regard to the murder, and he held till I justified myself. But he did not dare to accuse me of having committed it."

"If he did not do so, it is because he knows that you were not concerned in it, and if he knows that, he might designate the real woman who struck the blow. He listened with his ear against the partition. He must have heard you go out, then the door opened again—yes, he heard it, he told me so yesterday—and it is impossible he did not perceive that it was no longer the same voice. But I will force him to speak, the wretch. And, in spite of himself, he shall help me to find the guilty one—for I will find her."

"That button will also help you; you will place it in the hands of the magistrate; and some day it will be discovered to whom it belongs. But you have not yet said why you supposed it belonged to me."

"Because certain appearances accused you; because I started off with a false idea; because the button bore the initial of your name——"

"Of the name of my husband. My name was Carmen de Penafiel."

"Carmen?" repeated Nointel, with an accent which a lover could alone express.

It was none the less true that he had never stopped to think what name the marchioness had borne before becoming the wife of a governor of the island of Cuba.

"I knew that your name was Henri," she said quickly. Then, stopping with a gesture the burst of passion which was about to precipitate Nointel to her feet, she continued in a tremulous voice: "You no longer suspect me; you no longer believe that my hand was stained with the blood of that woman. But the magistrate will have his doubts. It will be necessary to prove to him that I do not lie. Has he seen this button?"

"No, I took it upon myself to keep it—I wished——"

"To make a test which has not produced the result you expected," interrupted the marchioness, smiling sadly. "But you are going to place it in the hands of Monsieur Roger Darcy. What shall you tell him on giving it to him?"

"The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I shall tell him that instead of suppressing an object which would have been a terrible proof against you if you had really killed Julia, you took pleasure in wearing it in such a way that everybody could see it; I shall tell him that you spontaneously returned it to me, and that you advised me to place it in his hands."

"And I will then tell him all I saw—all I heard on that terrible night. I will describe to him the woman who entered before and after me. I will repeat to him what was said to me by Julia d'Orcival."

"You remember it?"

"How could I have forgotten it? Every word spoken to me by that woman wounded me to the heart, and the wounds she caused me are not

yet healed ; among other things she said to me, there is one which I especially recall, for she hurled it at me on handing me the letters after a long and stormy discussion. She said to me : ' Take them, madame ; I can well do for you what I have just done for two women that Wenceslas Golymine betrayed.' "

" Two ! " repeated Nointel.

" Yes ; and she added : ' I had no trouble in coming to an understanding with them, for they are not great ladies, and I don't fear they will take my lover from me, to revenge themselves for having been abandoned by Wenceslas ; they are women of humble life who never did me an injury, and never will.' "

" Women of humble life," murmured the captain. " Mademoiselle Lestérel's sister is certainly of that class ; the other one, too, it appears. Julia did not name her ? "

" She uttered but one name, the count's, which she affected to throw constantly in my face, to humiliate me. "

" But, since then, when this young girl was arrested, did you not ask yourself if it was not the other one who had struck the blow ? "

" No ; I admit that I didn't. I had no motive for interesting myself in an *artiste* who had sung at my house, like many others, and who had never attracted my attention. Besides, the newspapers stated that she was guilty. I believed it, like everyone else, and it never occurred to me to undo what had been done by the magistrate. "

" You could not have undone it. It would have been your ruin. But now that you are determined to tell everything, it is the other woman who must be sought for. As long as she is not in the hands of justice, doubts will remain of your innocence. "

" No ; for I shall ask Monsieur Darcy to submit me to a decisive test. I shall ask him to have the scene which took place in the corridor of the opera house in front of the box door—to have this scene enacted in his office. I will put on the domino I wore that night, the lace veil which hid my face. The box-opener will be there. She will not have been warned. I will approach her, and say to her word for word what I said to her that night. As stupid or crazy as the creature may be, it is impossible that she should not recognise me, and then I will do my best to quicken her memory. I will remind her that just as I left the box, another woman in a domino entered it—"

" And no one can deny that it was that woman who struck the blow. Yes, the test will be decisive, and Monsieur Darcy will also impose it upon Mademoiselle Lestérel, who would find herself justified if she were not so already. When you see her under the plain domino she wore you will at once realise that it was not she who took your place in the box, and the box-opener will say the same. Ah ! madame, it is your courage which, in saving you, will save us all. "

" Were you in peril, then, you also ? " asked the marchioness, with a sad smile.

" I ran the greatest of all dangers, since I was threatened with losing you ! " exclaimed Nointel. " Did you not think of leaving France ? "

" And do you think, then, that I shall remain here ? No, sir. My decision is taken. I shall do my duty, by confessing to the magistrate, and after that—I shall go away—you will never see me again. "

" You will not prevent me from following you. "

" I forbid your doing so. "

"Do you also forbid my telling you that I love you, that I adore you, that I belong to you; to tell you so on my knees——"

He was about to fall upon them, but Madame de Barancos rose, and pointing to the wood on the left, she murmured: "Do you not hear that they are coming?" It was true. The two grooms had been obliged to make a long circuit to rejoin their mistress, but, turning the hill, they had now arrived near the rocks. "Not another word," said the marchioness. "We are awaited at the château."

No objection could be made. The grooms were not more than fifteen paces from the rocky clearing where the captain had just learned so much. At the sound of their steps poetry had taken wing. It was necessary to return to real life, to again assume the correct attitude of a guest who escorts his hostess. Nointel resigned himself to it with a sigh.

Madame de Barancos was already advancing to meet her servants, holding up the skirt of her riding-habit with one hand, and cracking her whip with the other. Her black mare followed her, neighing with delight. And the creole went her way decapitating the ferns. One would have said that she was flogging her slanderers. Nointel led his horse by the bridle, feeling somewhat ridiculous. He had put the gold button prosaically into his pocket, and he now thought much less of the chances of finding the owner of that piece of jewellery than of the opportunity which perhaps would never again present itself—the opportunity of engaging himself definitely with the marchioness. She had, with the greatest frankness, already confessed the feelings which had been inspired in her by the captain, and the latter had said quite enough to enable her to read his heart. But to these preliminaries, the signatures were wanting. She had spoken too soon, he had spoken too late; perfect accord had never existed, and neither of them was bound. Nointel could not forgive himself for having suspected this proud Spanish beauty, who boasted of her fault as others would have boasted of their virtue, and who would no more have concealed the fact that she had killed Julia d'Oreival in a transport of anger than she denied having loved the adventurer Golymine.

"If she had killed her," he said to himself, "she would have gone and told it to the examining magistrate, just as she will go and tell him that she entered the box to recover her letters. For she will go, I am sure of that, and, thanks to her boldness, Mademoiselle Lestérel will be doubly justified. Darcy will marry her, and I shall lose the most adorable woman I have ever met. Ah! friendship costs me dear!"

They reached a wide road leading to the château. No more confidential chats were to be hoped for. He disconsolately helped the marchioness into the saddle, and had the sorrow to hear her order her people to follow closer. "It is late," she said to him, as soon as he had mounted. "The *battue* will commence at noon; we still have to breakfast. So let us return, if you please, at full trot. I shall scarcely have time to change my costume."

"You intend shooting, then?" asked the captain.

"No doubt. I belong to my guests, and I shall not return to Paris till to-morrow morning; but you will be free to return this evening. Should you leave before I do, I shall be obliged to you if you will announce my visit to Monsieur Roger Darcy. I will see him some time during the day to-morrow." And, without giving the captain time to reply, she started her mare at so fast a trot that he experienced difficulty in keeping up with her. Moreover, on reaching the courtyard of the château she alighted

quickly to anticipate his assistance, and ran up the steps and disappeared, without having addressed a word to him. "She is fixed in her determination," he said to himself, as he sadly returned to his rooms. "I foresee that I shall cut a sorry figure all day; but I certainly shall not sleep here to-night."

He at once proceeded to put on his shooting costume, took his gun from its case, provided himself with assorted cartridges, and, when he had finished equipping himself, was conducted to the hall where the lunch was spread. There he found a numerous company. Some additional guests who had just arrived from Paris—men of society, whom he knew by sight, but who did not belong to his club, or to his circle of acquaintances. Not a single woman, the Spanish dowagers not unnaturally abstaining from taking part in the sport in preparation. They ate standing at a buffet plentifully furnished with cold dishes and generous wines. Saint-Galmier was refreshing himself with great gusto, while Simancas, having partaken of a frugal repast, sat in a corner reading a paper. Since Julia d'Orcival's death, he was always on the look out for news, and studied the law reports assiduously. He, however, interrupted his reading to rise and bow to the captain, and would, no doubt, have willingly asked if he was satisfied with his ride with the marchioness, but Nointel received him so coldly that he abstained from doing so. Nointel noticed a certain air about him which he had not evinced the night before, a sullen and slightly ironical air. However, the captain had determined to have soon done with this rogue, and did not trouble himself to seek for the cause of the change, which had come over his disagreeable face. Neither did he think of reminding him that he had promised the night before not to appear at the shooting-party.

The clock of the château struck noon as a footman announced that the carriages were ready. Every one armed himself, and went outside. Three large breaks, each drawn by four horses, were standing in the yard, beside an elegant victoria, in which the marchioness had already taken her place. She wore a Polish cap, trimmed with astrakan, a velvet jacket, with a collar of otter fur, a kilt skirt, velvet breeches, and patent leather gaiters. This almost masculine costume was marvellously becoming to her, and added a peculiar zest to her beauty. She resembled Diana—a Diana attired by a fashionable dressmaker, but of as divine a figure as the goddess who changed the indiscreet Acteon into a stag. The breaks were taken by assault; the countryfolks, who looked on at a distance, raised cheers in honour of the lady of the château, and the old poachers hastened to take up good positions on the borders of the woods with a view of killing the hares and roebucks imprudent enough to leave the guarded inclosure.

The woods contiguous to the château of Sandonville were pierced like a royal forest, and the roads were extremely well kept. In less than twenty minutes the equipages reached an open space at the cross-roads, where they were awaited by twelve gamekeepers, in uniform, and a strong squad of beaters, gathered from the neighbouring villages. Nointel had made the journey with some Spaniards who talked but little. Simancas and Saint-Galmier had discreetly entered another carriage, so that he had not to endure the irksomeness of their company, and could think at his leisure over the events of the morning.

"Gentlemen," said Madame de Barancos, as she alighted, "we are going to commence with shooting hares in the plain; we shall next draw on my preserves for some pheasants, and will finish with a *battue* for roebucks in the forest. Evening comes early at this season, so the shooting

will be over by three o'clock; those of you who won't do me the favour to remain can be in Paris in time to dine."

"She is decidedly anxious to send me away," thought Nointel, who took this notice for himself.

The programme was accepted with enthusiasm. The gamekeepers led the way, and the sportsmen followed them towards the plain which opened at a few hundred paces from the place of the meet. Nointel had so arranged as to remain in the rear guard, at some distance from the marchioness, and he was surprised to see Simanca chatting with her, the more so as she seemingly did not refuse to listen to him. It is true that the colloquy was not of long duration. In five minutes' time the plain was reached. The chief gamekeeper began setting the marksmen in position. The most distinguished guests were placed fifty paces apart, on a line facing the plain; the others were arranged in *echelon* fashion on the two sides. The captain was among the favoured ones. He had the marchioness on his right and the distinguished Spaniard on his left hand. The cries of the "beaters" were soon heard, and a long line of them appeared in the distance, carrying sticks and beating the brush amid great uproar. The hares, disturbed in their siesta, darted off crazed by the noise, and in their bewilderment threw themselves under the guns which awaited them on the right, the left, and the front. The firing began on all sides, and Madame de Barancos participated in it very successfully. She did not miss a hare, and five or six wandering partridges having passed over her head in full flight, she brought down two of them at one shot. "What coolness," said the captain to himself. "I understand now why she isn't intimidated by the threats of a Simanca."

Meanwhile, the first act of the piece had been played. The beaters picked up the dead game under the vigilant eyes of the keepers, while the marchioness invited her guests to follow her to the preserves, where the massacre commenced again, this time on the pheasants. Nointel contented himself with firing two or three times with both barrels, but Madame de Barancos furiously blazed away all the while. After this grand display of fireworks, after the oldest of the pheasants, gathered in the extreme corner of the preserve, had all risen at once singing their song of death, it was announced that the roebuck *battue* would begin.

The woods which were to be surrounded were situated at some distance from the preserves, and the sportsmen had to walk for some time with their guns at rest. Madame de Barancos took the lead, and the captain followed her leisurely. He saw Simanca pass by near him—after remaining behind on the pretext of looking for a cock pheasant which had lost a wing—and he perceived that the Peruvian looked somewhat discomfited. Was it the loss of his game or his interview with the marchioness which had clouded his face? The captain inclined to the second hypothesis. "She must have informed him that she meant to turn him out of the house," he thought. "It seems to me that she was in rather too much of a hurry. This scoundrel can do her an injury. I must take it upon myself to bring him to reason before he has time to act against her."

However, Simanca, half out of breath, went forward with long strides loudly crying: "Gentlemen, I have just been chatting with the beaters, who tell me there are some wild boars in the woods which they are about to beat—two or three young ones and an old fellow whose reputation is already made—he has already ripped up a dozen dogs." To

my mind we had better each of us slip a ball cartridge into one of the barrels of our guns."

"I shan't fail to do so," exclaimed Saint-Galmier "I have no desire to be ripped up."

The captain, however, troubled himself little about the wild boars. He was thinking of defending himself against some bipeds who were much more dangerous than those animals, and he gave no heed to the Peruvian's warning. Meanwhile some twenty or thirty beaters, in blouses and wooden shoes, were running one after the other along a ditch beside the road. They were hurrying, so as to reach the inclosure they had to attack, before the shooting party. One of these countrymen, the last in the line, made a false step in his haste, and fell uttering a terrible oath. Nointel turned at the noise, just as the man was getting up, and saw a face not unknown to him. Where had the captain already seen that bearded mug, half-hidden by a wide-brimmed hat pulled down to the eyes, and by a large red woollen comforter? He could not have said, although he vaguely remembered having seen it somewhere before. The man wore large wooden shoes, which had made him trip, and a blue blouse, which descended below his knees: he was to all appearance a countryman of the neighbourhood. Nointel having never visited the neighbourhood before could not have met this villager. So he thought he was mistaken, and gave the matter no further attention. Besides, the peasant had quickly risen and joined his comrades, who scampered away like hares, and had soon passed the column of guests.

At last the coppice was reached where the grand *battue* was to take place. It was of sufficient extent for the shooting-party to be distributed on three of its sides, in groups. Nointel found himself once more placed on the left of Madame de Barancos, and to the right of a Spanish seignior of high rank. He had in front of him an open glade covered with dry herbage, of sufficient height to serve as a cover for the deer. Beyond extended a coppice of thinly scattered underwood, a two years' growth, with here and there a large stump behind which a man might have hidden. At the edge of the road bordering the enclosure there were some old oaks a sufficient distance apart to serve as a shelter for each member of the party. The captain leaned with his back against his tree, his gun resting on the ground, and looked at his beautiful neighbour. She acted as though she did not know he was there, and yet she had placed him there herself. She was very busily engaged in changing the cartridges in her gun, perhaps in anticipation of an attack from one of the wild boars that Simancas had announced. And when she had finished that operation, she took her position behind the trunk of the oak she had chosen, and remained there perfectly still, with her eye on the path she was guarding and her finger on the trigger. An expert poacher would not have manœuvred better.

Nointel began thinking. "What is Darcy doing at this time?" he asked himself. "Is he at Mademoiselle Lestrel's feet, or in his uncle's office? Is he imploring an order of discharge, or is he thanking Madame Cambry for having so warmly defended his friend? It is certain that he isn't thinking of me; or if he is, it is to curse me. He accuses me of having abandoned him to run after the marchioness. He does not at all suspect the surprise I am preparing for him, and to-morrow he will throw himself on my neck when he knows what I have done here. If he marries the woman he loves, he will owe it

to me—to me and Madame de Barancos, who will prove by a demonstrative argument that Monsieur Crozon's sister-in-law did not kill Julia d'Orceival. It remains, however, to be seen how the magistrate will look at the affair in its changed aspect. Suppose he shouldn't believe in the marchioness's declaration, and send her to prison? No; he is too intelligent to take the wrong road a second time. And then I shall be there. I shall return to Paris this evening; I shall see him, I shall see Madame Majoré——” At this point his reflections were interrupted by a sharp sound, a noise which came from the edge of the under-wood, like the crackling of some dead branch which is broken. Evidently something was stirring in the wood. Was it an animal or a man? Nointel looked carefully and saw nothing. It is true that in the direction from which the noise came, a thick trunk intercepted the view. But the game was probably moving, for a confused sound was wafted from the distance. The game-drivers were attacking the inclosure, and roebucks usually rise as soon as they hear them. “Pon my word!” thought Nointel, “if that is one, I am capable of letting it pass. I don't feel in the humour for killing inoffensive creatures to-day.”

Soon he saw the tall herbage undulate, a small head appear, and two large glistening eyes look at him without seeing him, for he was completely hidden by the oak. His old sporting instincts returned, and he grasped his gun by the barrel; but this was only a passing velleity. He did not fire. The roe's look was too gentle. Unfortunately for the poor animal, the Spaniard on the left had also seen it. He fired and it fell, uttering a cry like a child being slaughtered, a cry which even old keepers do not hear without heart-sickness. “Thus end the innocent,” murmured the captain, whose mind that day turned to sentimental reflections.

To this first shot twenty others replied. The firing began on the left; it rapidly approached, and Nointel soon heard a heavy and rapid rolling noise. One would have said that a platoon of cavalry was galloping through the woods. A herd of wild boars had just left its lair and was scampering at full speed in front of the line of marksmen. The sow led the way, followed by three young hogs, and the bristling band defied small shot, for, in spite of Simancas' warning, few of the party had taken the precaution to change their cartridges. The captain sent his two loads of number six after the hogs without scruples. The largest of the four animals received them, and only shook its ears, but just as Nointel fired he heard something whistle, then a muffled sound, and felt a somewhat severe blow on his cheek. Almost at the same time a regular salvo burst forth around him; the sow was struck down, and the young hogs disappeared at full speed into the depths of the woods. Madame de Barancos, better advised than her guests, had put a bullet into one barrel of her gun, and had lodged this bullet in the shoulder of the animal which had been missed by the others.

Nointel bowed to her from a distance to express the admiration this exploit had inspired in him, and then felt his cheek, which had just received an inexplicable slap, and also looked at the trunk of the tree against which he was leaning. He there saw a mark freshly made, a hole in the shape of a funnel. He at once realised its meaning. A bullet had passed within two inches of his head; it was at the bottom of the hole, and the bark it had made fly had grazed his face. “Dash it!” he grumbled, looking at his neighbour on the left, “that hidalgo has a singular way of shooting at boars. I have a good mind to change my place. If I remain

here, he will surely kill me the first time a roebuck comes between him and me."

He was about to speak to his neighbour, when, on looking closer, he saw that the bullet had not come from that direction. The Spaniard was to the left, on the same line as himself, and the bullet had come a little obliquely perhaps, still it had been fired from almost in front. By whom? No one was to be seen in the glade or on the edge of the coppice. Had some crazy fellow rushed into the woods in pursuit of the hogs, contrary to the rules of the chase? That was the most probable supposition, and yet the captain began to suspect that the shot had been deliberately aimed, but not at the hogs. "If that scoundrel of a Simancas was within range," he thought to himself, "no doubt but he would willingly profit by the passage of the herd to fire a bad shot very skilfully. He must have suspected that I was playing him false last evening, and if, as I fear, the marchioness has intimated his dismissal to him, he must, no doubt, impute his disgrace to me, and imagine that by ridding himself of me he will recover his hold on Madame de Barancos. Yes, but Simancas is far from here—he was sent to the other side of the inclosure, and unless he has returned on all fours and hidden himself behind that stump I see over there—I will have my eye in that direction. The great start is just commencing. The roebucks can run between my legs, I shan't trouble myself about them."

The beaters had gained ground. They could be heard vociferating and striking the saplings with their sticks, and the peaceful denizens of the woods scampered off in all haste. The hares passed almost unperceived amid the roebucks, who fled in all directions. Along the line on which Nointel was placed there was a continual skirmishing fire. But the centre was badly guarded, for the captain remained at carry-arms, and the marchioness took no part in the massacre. On the other hand, the Spaniard fired away furiously, and killed at every shot.

"It wasn't he who sent a bullet at the height of my head while aiming at a sow," said Nointel to himself. And he kept his eyes open more than ever.

All at once a great clamour arose in the wood, and one of the keepers who directed the beaters was heard shouting: "Look out there, in front! A boar is coming. Look out!"

"It seems that the boar is there, too," murmured Nointel. "That vagabond of a Peruvian was well-informed. Now is the time to take my precautions." And, turning to his cartridge-box, he took from it two ball cartridges, which he substituted for those with which he had loaded his gun.

Almost immediately he heard the well-known noise which announces the approach of an old boar. The wood crackled under the weight of its brute force, and the young saplings fell under the blows of its snout, like grain cut by the sickle. One would have said that a locomotive was rushing through the wood. "The animal is coming straight for us," thought the captain, who was listening attentively to this uproar; "for us—that is to say, for the marchioness—I see the branches bending in front of her—he will start out by the path she is guarding, and she isn't the woman to yield to him. This is the time, if ever, to support her by a change of front to the right." And leaving the protecting shelter of the oak behind which he had been in ambush, he took a few steps towards Madame de Barancos.

She had not moved from her place, but had her gun already at her shoulder. It was time. The boar had reached the edge of the under-wood, and had only the clearing to cross. Nointel also made ready to fire; but on looking for the last time at the marchioness, he perceived that she was giving no attention to the imminent attack with which she was threatened. Her eyes were not turned towards the coppice from which the animal was about to rush, nor was her gun pointed in that direction. "Madame," he cried out to her as loud as he could, "attention in front! the boar is upon you!"

She did not change her position, however, and the captain, amazed by this indifference, which he took for a sign of madness, only thought of saving her in spite of herself. He braced himself solidly on his feet, and raised his gun to his shoulder. At this moment the boar dashed out, bristling, furious, with fiery eyes and protruding tusks. He hesitated for a moment, after the first spring he made into the tall herbage, and, then, resuming his onward rush, charged upon the marchioness. Then Nointel fired, and the beast—suddenly stopped in mid career by a ball which perforated its heart—fell in a heap. Another shot was fired at the same moment, a shot fired by Madame de Barancos, and it was not the boar she had aimed at.

This exciting scene had not lasted thirty seconds, and those who had witnessed it plainly saw that Madame de Barancos had escaped great danger. The boar had fallen almost at her feet, and if Nointel's ball had deviated but an inch the marchioness would have been killed. The guests all ran up, leaving their posts, and more than one poor roebuck who would infallibly have fallen under their fire was able to pass through the line without accident. It was now to be seen who would compliment the courageous marchioness on her coolness and her skill, for almost every one believed she had with her own white hand fired the shot which had struck down the monster. She received the congratulations with surprising calmness; one would have thought that she had done nothing all her life but kill wild boars at point-blank range. This one was of a size to disembowel a horse, and the formidable tusks which armed its enormous snout would have made the most intrepid huntsman recoil. Nointel, on examining it, turned pale at the thought that this terrible beast had nearly trampled upon Madame de Barancos. He knew very well to whom the adorable woman owed her salvation, but did not care to undeceive those who believed that she owed it only to herself; still he was anxious to be alone with her that he might express to her all he had felt during the performance of this brief but exciting drama which had terminated so fortunately. Perhaps the marchioness had divined his desire, for she almost immediately furnished him an opportunity for a *tête-à-tête*. Having briefly thanked her guests for the interest they evinced in her, she reminded them that the *battue* was not yet finished, and begged of them to take their places again in the line. Then, adding example to precept, she again took up her position at the edge of the path; however, the captain flattered himself that this general order did not concern him, and, instead of returning to his oak, he accompanied her while the others hastened to resume their places. The roebucks, closely pressed by the beaters, now arrived in herds, and the firing broke forth once more.

"Thanks," simply said Madame de Barancos, glancing at the captain with a look which stirred his heart. "But for you I should be dead."

"You wished to die, then," exclaimed Nointel. "I warned you, I

shouted—it was all useless—you did not stir, and, instead of firing at the boar, you fired in the air.”

“You think so?”

“I saw it. I realised that you were lost if I did not stop the beast. So I fired; and it is a miracle that my hand did not tremble, for the sense of the danger which threatened you took all my coolness from me.”

“And so you only thought of me?”

“Can you ask me that?”

“That is true; I was wrong to ask such a question, for I only thought of you.”

“What! at the moment, when your life depended on a false movement, on the loss of a second—you thought of me, who ran no risk? It was not I whom the boar charged.”

“You saw nothing excepting the boar, then?”

“I saw you also—motionless, impassible, heroic, in face of a peril which would have made an old soldier turn pale.”

“And before the boar charged me you heard nothing?”

“Nothing but the firing of my neighbours, the shouts of the beaters, and the means of the wounded roebucks.”

“It seems to me that you must have heard a bullet whistle by.”

“How do you know that?” exclaimed Nointel.

“What does it matter how I know it? I am not mistaken, am I?”

“No, it is true. Some unknown party came near killing me, by shooting at a venture. The bullet passed within two inches of my head, and buried itself in the oak I was leaning against.”

“And you did not think proper to change your position?”

“What good would it have done? I should have been quite as much exposed elsewhere; no one is safe, no matter where he may go, when it is a question of the antics of an inexperienced sportsman. And then, I believe in the Arabian proverb which says: ‘Destiny kills, not bullets.’ Experience in war has made a fatalist of me.”

“Then it did not occur to you that the bullet was intended for you?”

“What an idea! Simancas is, perhaps, quite capable of trying to assassinate me, but Simancas is five or six hundred yards from here, and, unless he brought a chassépôt under his hunting jacket— Besides, the bullet came from the direction of the beaters—and in the glade there was no one in front of me.”

“Are you sure of that?”

Nointel started, and he gave a questioning look at Madame de Barancos, who said to him: “Wait till the end of the *battue*, and, whatever may happen, don’t be astonished at anything. Now let us separate. Return to your oak and fire at the roebucks as though nothing had taken place. You will not be aimed at again.”

The captain would willingly have asked for an explanation, but he realised that a long colloquy would be noticed, and so he submitted to the marchioness’s injunction. He shot at the roebucks, and did not allow one to pass him, for he no longer thought of reserving his fire. He was reflecting over the strange conversation he had just had with Madame de Barancos, and he could not explain to himself the meaning of her mysterious words. Meanwhile the massacre reached its close. The line of beaters approached nearer and nearer, and as fast as this line passed the sportsmen posted on the lateral sides of the enclosure, they fell back on the side occupied by the marchioness and her chosen guests. The wood

was almost emptied. A few brockets and tardy roes passed by at long distances under the fire of the privileged marksmen. The young hogs had forced the line, and were still running; but the boar, the sow, and a hundred other victims, were scattered over the clearing. Soon the gamekeeper, who commanded the beaters, was seen to emerge from the woods, and the firing ceased. The *battue* was over.

Nointel, delighted at having done with it, had just withdrawn two cartridges from his gun, when he heard some shouts, followed by a great commotion. He looked up, and saw the villagers grouped around the stump which had attracted his attention at the beginning of the *battue*. "What is going on?" asked Madame de Barancos, pointing to the group of villagers who had already been joined by some of the shooting-party. "I fear that some accident has happened."

Nointel understood that she wished him to inform her, and he ran to the gathering. Behind the stump he saw a man extended on his back, his face covered with blood, his forehead pierced by a bullet—a man whom he at once recognised as having seen pass an hour before. It was the beater who had tripped in the ditch while following his comrades. He still held in his hand a very short gun, which he must have carried hidden under his blouse. His hat had fallen off, and his face could now be plainly seen. Nointel's memory returned to him, and he remembered where he had seen that sinister face before. It was that of Saint-Galmier's alcoholised patient, the vagabond who had threatened to send the doctor to Nouméa. How did he happen to be at Sandouville, disguised as a countryman? Who had killed him? All the beaters swore that he did not belong in their part of the country; that he had joined them without being asked; that they had allowed him to do so because they took him for a poor devil desirous of earning a day's pay, and that he had suddenly disappeared just as they began driving the roebucks forward. The gamekeeper, a connoisseur in gun-shot wounds, declared that he must have involuntarily killed himself with his gun. "He no doubt took it by the barrel, and a bramble must have caught on the trigger," he said. "The rascal had no doubt hidden himself so as to steal two or three roebucks, and the bullet which broke his head was meant for me if I had caught him. It is only a poacher. No great harm is done."

Nointel began to understand. At this moment he heard the voice of Simancas, who, running forward at the top of his speed, cried out from afar: "Ah! good heavens! Can one of Madame de Barancos' friends have been wounded? Where is Monsieur the captain Nointel?"

"Here I am, sir," replied Nointel, leaving the group. "Have no fears. I am marvellously well. Bullets respect me because they know me." And as the Peruvian drew back in amazement, he added: "The event is none the less to be deplored, and the marchioness will be grieved to learn that this unfortunate fellow has killed himself on her estate. It is nevertheless, as well for her to know that we have not to regret the death of one of her guests—yours, for instance, or that of Monsieur Saint-Galmier. I will go and reassure her."

Simancas, nonplussed, did not reply to this ironical speech, but mingled with the group around the corpse. Nointel, without troubling himself further about him, returned to the marchioness. She was already surrounded by a crowd. A Spaniard related to her what he had just seen, and a gamekeeper what had been said by his comrade. In their presence the captain had only to remain silent, nevertheless, he was anxious to speak.

"Gentlemen," said the marchioness, with emotion, "this shooting-party terminates so sadly that you will permit me to return at once to the château. My head gamekeeper is at the service of those of you who still desire to carry on the sport. I have just given him orders to notify the mayor of the village. It seems that all help is of no avail, since this unfortunate fellow was instantaneously killed. However, Monsieur Saint-Galmier is a doctor, and he would do everything necessary if it were possible to save him." The victoria had already advanced. The breaks were waiting a little farther away. "Till we meet again, gentlemen," continued Madame de Barancos, "Monsieur Nointel, who desires to return to Paris by the first train, will accompany me."

This arrangement satisfied everybody and especially the captain. He helped his hostess into the carriage, and took a seat beside her. The horses of the victoria were guided by a postilion, so that the captain and the marchioness could chat without danger of being overheard. "At last," said Nointel, moved to the depths of his soul, "I know why you did not fire at the boar which was coming straight at you—I know that you came near dying for me—for I have divined everything—that bandit aimed at me—you killed him, and——"

"Yes, I saw him," interrupted the marchioness, in an unsteady voice: "I saw him twice. The first time, when he fired at you, his odious face showed itself for an instant over the stump. The shot was fired, and then the man disappeared. But I understood the matter and I watched. I thought that the assassin was waiting until the boar appeared, to try again. Your death was to pass as the result of an accident. Oh! he had made all his calculations—and this time, he would have killed you. Fortunately, I was there."

"And I owe you my life."

"I also owe you mine."

"You risked yours. As for me, I only did what any one would have done in my place. I sacrificed nothing, because I did not see the wretch who had me at the end of his gun."

"If you had seen him, you still would only have thought of saving me—of that I am sure. We are quits. Let us drop the subject. Time is precious. Why did this man wish to assassinate you?"

"This man? I have just recognised him. He is a brigand who was in the pay of Simancas!"

"You are sure of that?"

"I surprised them together, a few days ago, in Saint-Galmier's office. And that scoundrel's death is almost a misfortune, for I held the other two through fear. I threatened them with revealing their connection with a malefactor, and now they are no longer in fear of their accomplice's evidence."

"What does it matter? I have ordered them away."

"I suspected it. That was why Simancas resolved to finish with me. He attributed his expulsion to my influence. And as he had summoned this bandit from Paris to be ready in any event, he no doubt said a word to him in passing. The man was armed. He left the beaters with whom he had mingled; he made his way to the stump; he awaited the moment, and——"

"I killed him like a dog; I killed him without pity, and I feel no remorse for having done so," said the marchioness, raising her head.

"But Simancas will not believe in an accident. Simancas knows that

the bullet which pierced this rogue's skull was from your gun or mine. An examination of the body will prove that the shot was fired from a distance. An investigation will be made, and then——"

"Do you think then that I intend to hide what I have done?"

"What! you will——"

"I shall tell everything to Monsieur Roger Darcy, the examining magistrate. I shall commence by relating to him my visit to Julia d'Orceival at the opera house ball, and I shall finish with the narrative of this shooting-party, at which I have executed a would-be assassin with my own hand. Monsieur Darcy will plainly see that I don't know how to lie." And as Nointel was about to raise some objections, Madame de Barancos added coldly: "My resolution is irrevocable. We are about to reach the château. You are going away. I wish it."

"When shall I see you again?" asked Nointel, anxiously.

"Perhaps to-morrow, perhaps never," replied the marchioness, springing from the victoria which had just stopped before the steps of the château.

VI.

Two hours after receiving the marchioness's ultimatum, much against his will, Nointel left the train which had brought him to Paris, sprang into a cab, and was driven to the Rue d'Anjou.

His valet, who had not expected him so soon, had gone to dine at a restaurant with some neighbouring coachmen, and the captain was obliged to have his trunk carried upstairs by the doorkeeper of the house. There was no one to prepare his toilet; no one to prepare his dinner. The cook has taken advantage of his absence to go to Versailles, where a friend, who served in the cuirassiers, awaited her. Nointel was acquainted, by experience, with the little annoyances of bachelor life, and usually bore them patiently; but on this particular day he was so out of sorts that he swore to discharge his retainers the very next day. Meanwhile he had to resign himself to dress alone and to get something to eat wherever he could. He commenced by opening some letters which had come during his absence, and which were spread out on a Chinese lacquered tray in the middle of his study table. There were three of them, including one from Gaston, which he naturally opened first. "If you are still my friend," wrote Darcy, "come and see me as soon as you return to Paris. Great events have taken place since I saw you. I need advice, and especially encouragement."

"The epistle is dry and cold," murmured the captain. "Darcy is angry with me, that's clear. He is very wrong, and when I have chatted with him for five minutes, he will change his tone. But what the deuce does he expect me to encourage him to do? To marry Mademoiselle Lestérel? It seems to me that he is quite disposed to do that. Well, we shall see. I will call at the Rue Montaigne and take him to dine with me at a restaurant. I wish to consult him before I approach his uncle."

He did not know the handwriting of the addresses of the other two letters. One of them looked as if it came from a woman. Coloured paper; fly-tracks somewhat incorrect. He opened it to satisfy his conscience, for he was not in the humour for reading love-letters. "Ah!"

he said, after glancing at the signature, "it is from Julia's maid. What does she want with me?"

"Monsieur," wrote Mariette, "I have followed the advice you gave me on the day of the burial of my poor mistress, and I am now in the service of Madame Rissler. I have a great many things to tell you, and yesterday I called at your house, but I was told you were away. If you would have the kindness to call, on your return, at Madame Claudine's, Rue de Lisbonne, No. 89, she would be very happy to see you to tell you all she knows on a subject which interests you, and if you would also listen to me, you certainly would not regret having troubled yourself."

"Hum!" grumbled Nointel, "is this a pretext for attracting me to Claudine's? Her Russian friend Wladimir has perhaps left her, and she is in search of a substitute. That's possible; but in that case she would not cast her eyes on me. She knows me too well. She knows that I don't take the place of boyards. Then, she and her maid have really something to tell me about the affair at the opera house? I must neglect nothing—especially now that I have to demonstrate the innocence of two in place of one. So I will go to the Rue de Lisbonne. But let us look at this last letter, what mistakes in spelling, and what a cook's writing. Can it be mine, who has written to let me know that she takes an unlimited holiday? Oh! oh!" he exclaimed after opening the envelope and looking at the signature, "it is from Madame Majoré. I am curious to know what she wants with me."

"Dear Sir"—this box-opener is familiar—"Since the charming evening which my daughters and I had the advantage of spending in your society, I have had many annoyances. That blackguard of a player who took supper beside us has had the meanness to write an anonymous letter to Monsieur Majoré, and that mischievous Caroline Roquillon has told all the girls that my daughters, with you and Monsieur Darcy, made up a party of four in a restaurant. It was not a party of four, for I was there. But, in fact, the thing is known at the theatre and it harms my little ones' reputation, just at the time when they are about to pass their examination. Just think, their future is in question. But it is not that which worries me the most. The fact is I have been stupid enough to tell Monsieur Majoré that I found a sleeve-button in the box where Madame d'Orceval was assassinated. He blamed me severely for not having placed it in the hands of justice, and when he knew that I had entrusted it to you, he flew into a passion. He declares that I shall be sent to prison as a false witness; that I shall dishonour his name. To be brief, he leads me a terrible life every day, and, if it continues, I shall become crazy. So I shall be greatly obliged to you, dear sir, if you will return me the object as soon as possible, and also, if you could come some evening to the ballet green-room and close the mouths of Caroline Roquillon and her witch of a mother, who vilify my daughters. I dare not present myself at your residence for fear of the tittle-tattle. There is already enough of it. But I am none the less, dear sir, your devoted servant, Euphrasie Majoré."

"That letter ought to be framed," said Nointel, "and she who wrote it also. I shall not return her her sleeve-button, for I am going to hand it to Monsieur Roger Darcy. But it is necessary that I should see her—that I should prepare her for the new examination, that she must submit to. It is on her now that the marchioness's fate depends. If she should get confused in her testimony again, further judicial errors might occur. And Madame de Barancos declared to me that she would see the magis-

trate as early as to-morrow. Where shall I find Madame Majoré this evening? There is no performance at the opera. I would willingly go to see her in the green-room of the ballet, but at her domestic fireside—oh! no, I have no desire to meet Monsieur Majoré. Well, I will tell everything to Gaston; and when he knows the whole case, he will, perhaps, give me an idea. But if I am to attend to everything to-day, I have no time to lose, and I shall have to dress at a gallop."

The correspondence had been completely exhausted, and the captain at once proceeded with his toilet while thinking of the events which had marked his sojourn at Sandouville. He reflected on the danger he had run, and on the perils which still threatened the marchioness. He loved Madame de Barancos without remorse, since she had made a frank avowal to him, and he forgave her for having loved Golymine. Still more did he forgive her for having sent the vile instrument of Simancas' hateful designs into the other world. This manly deed inspired him with real admiration, and he blessed the strange concurrence of circumstances which had brought about the scene of the clearing. The marchioness owed him her life, and he owed his life to her. Were they not bound to each other by gratitude, even though they had not been by love—a violent, impassioned love—a love which nothing could extinguish?

But he also looked at all the consequences of this love, and realised fully that severe trials were reserved for him. The great question was how M. Darcy would take the marchioness's declaration—how he could be induced to place full confidence in her words. "Gaston will help me," said the captain to himself, as he put on his overcoat. "He must help me; I have done enough for him. We are now both interested in discovering the cunning hussy who killed Julia, and whom no one has yet suspected. So long as the magistrate does not hold her, he will be in doubt, and Mademoiselle Lestérel's justification will not be complete. This third mistress of Golymine's is very able, and we shall have a deal of trouble in finding her. If hands could only be laid on one of her letters, we should have her. Simancas, perhaps, knows something about her, and if he would speak—— Yes, but he will take good care not to. And then, I am no longer in a position to negotiate with him. The scoundrel has tried to have me murdered, and I have now only to try to send him to New Caledonia—and that won't, perhaps, be easy, now that his third accomplice is dead. However, anyway, we will try," said Nointel.

With this conclusion he started on his way to see his friend, but on reaching the Rue Montaigne he learned that Gaston had just gone out, without saying where; he might just as well be at Madame Cambry's, or at Mademoiselle Lestérel's, as at the club or elsewhere. The captain accordingly left his card, with a few words in pencil written on it: "I have returned, and am anxious to see you. I will be at the club at midnight." He then went his way, without knowing exactly how he ought to commence his visits. He wished to chat with Gaston before presenting himself to M. Darcy. Madame de Barancos would not return to Paris till the next day, so Nointel could see the magistrate in the morning, and prepare him to listen to her. This was what he decided upon after due reflection, and then he asked himself what he should do with his evening. "Suppose I go to see Claudine," he thought. "I am almost sure to find her dressing to go to the theatre. I should very much like to know what she has to say to me—on a subject which interests me," as is

stated by her maid. Yes, it's settled. I will go there. In the position I am in, I must neglect no opportunity of gaining information."

A cab was passing. Nointel hailed it, and was driven to the Rue de Lisbonne, where Claudine occupied an apartment on the first floor of a new house. He nimbly ascended the stairs, and was received at the door of the flat by Mariette, Julia's former maid. "Ah! Monsieur Nointel," exclaimed Mariette, "it is very amiable of you to have come. You excuse me for having written to you?"

"What do you mean? do I excuse you! but I have rather to thank you. Is your mistress to be seen?"

"She is dressing; but she will receive you all the same."

"The Russian isn't there?"

"No, he won't come for her till seven o'clock. Ah! she will be pleased to see you. I went to your residence yesterday, but you had just gone away to a hunt, I was told. I was on the point of going in search of your friend, Monsieur Darcy, but I did not dare, because——"

"What have you so urgent to make known to him or me?"

"Ah! there it is! Madame has forbidden me to tell you. She is anxious to inform you of it herself. But, bah! you can behave as though you knew nothing. I can very well confide to you that we now know the person who paid for the ground where Madame d'Orceval was interred."

"Really?" exclaimed Nointel, surprised and delighted by the good news announced to him by the maid.

"Upon my word of honour," replied Mariette, "madame saw her as I see you."

"I don't doubt it. Who is she?"

"Ah! as to that, sir, the least I can do is to leave madame to relate the story to you. I have already told you too much about it. But I thought you would like to know as soon as possible what was in question, because you might have thought that madame merely wished to see you. If it had been that, I swear to you that I should not have allowed myself to write to you. I also have some news to tell you, but it would take too long to explain it to you now. I will talk to you after you have seen madame. Only, I should like to ask you if Monsieur Darcy is very angry with me?"

"Why should he be angry with you?"

"Why—because I spoke badly of his sweetheart. You perhaps don't remember what I said to him, at his residence one morning, in his dressing-room? You were there, however."

"Well, what? You told him it was Mademoiselle Lestérel who had struck the blow. You believed it, the examining magistrate believed it—everybody believed it. One is allowed to be mistaken."

"Yes, but I treated the young lady as a prude, a hussy, a jade—and before Monsieur Darcy, who was in love with her. He loves her so well that he is going to marry her, it seems. Ah, if I had only known it."

"You would have put a bridle on your tongue. No matter! there is never any harm in saying what one thinks."

"That depends. My frankness costs me forty thousand francs, which Monsieur Darcy would have given me to buy a business. I shan't go and ask him for them now—you may be sure of that. I know the gentlemen. When they are smitten with a woman, they never forgive those who speak ill of her."

"Even when she has ceased to please," said Nointel, laughing.

"Never, never," continued the maid, earnestly. "However, I have changed my mind about the singer. I believe that she really went to the appointment which Madame Julia made with her. But I think she was not the only one who did so."

"Ah! ah! why do you think that?"

"I have my reasons. You see, sir, I have passed in review all I saw before that unfortunate ball at the opera house, and I have reflected that just as Madame Julia was about to leave, she stuffed into the bosom of her dress not one packet, but two or three packets of letters—two at least. And then, a remark she made to me has returned to my mind. 'How stupid they are, these women of society, to write so often!' An artiste who gives music lessons is not a woman of society."

"That is true, and you have set your finger on the answer to the riddle. It is proved now that several dominoes entered Julia's box; that Mademoiselle Lestérel entered it at the very beginning of the ball; that she remained there but a moment, and that other women came after her. So it was not she who used the knife. But no matter. There is never too much favourable evidence, and you will do well to tell the magistrate what you have just told me."

"Oh! I ask no better, but I bet that it will not reinstate me in your friend's good graces. I might swear that his princess is innocent, but it would not make me recover my poor forty thousand francs. Monsieur Darcy has no longer any need of me."

"Who knows? Mademoiselle Lestérel is at liberty, that is true, and the persecution will no longer be carried on against her. But something of it will always remain, whereas if the real culprit were found, Mademoiselle Lestérel would appear as white as snow. And I will guarantee to you that Darcy would not haggle over your reward, if you rendered him that service."

"Well, sir, I can render it to him. It was exactly for that I was so anxious to see you."

"What! you know the jade who killed Julia!"

"Yes, I know her well. In all Paris there is but one woman who could have done such a thing—a woman who detested my mistress, and whom my mistress detested in her turn, a woman who had been the mistress of Count Golyminine—I would put my hand in the fire if that is not so—a woman whose letters must have been in one of the packets——"

"Name her, then, dash it all!" interrupted Nointel, impatiently.

"You know her very well, captain; it is the Marchioness de Barancos."

Mariette was truly not in luck. After accusing Berthe Lestérel before Gaston Darcy, she accused the marchioness before Nointel. It was written that she should never have her dry-goods business.

"Well, my girl," said the captain to her quietly, "you have some wit and excellent intentions, but your watch is slow. It is a long time since the magistrate thought of this Spanish lady, but it seems that she justified herself."

"That isn't possible!"

"It's a fact, however, and unless you have new proofs against her——"

"Well! I did not see her use the poniard; but as far as being sure that she had an appointment with madame——"

"Good! that is known. But, we are chattering here, and your mistress awaits me. She is ringing with all her might. Take me to her."

Mariette preceded the captain through several rooms encumbered with

furniture and incongruous nick-nacks. It was evident that Claudine's luxury dated from yesterday. Nothing was matched in this newly occupied apartment. Old furniture elbowed the products of modern cabinet-makers. Pictures of considerable value and real artistic merit hung opposite daubs from the brushes of petty painters whom Claudine had formerly known—wretched *souvenirs* of her excursions to Barbizon and Marlotte. Nointel found Claudine looking as fresh as a peach from Montreuil, with eyes capable of setting fire to the lace curtains of her boudoir, and teeth fit to crack a princely appanage. "At last you are here," she said. "I was afraid you would not come. I thought you might still have a grudge against me about old times."

"Not at all. Besides, your maid wrote to me so pressingly——"

"Ah, yes! I wanted to speak to you about poor Julia. Mariette, I know, told you that it was Wladimir who paid the funeral expenses."

"Yes, and I recognised *your* good heart in that; but——"

"But you would like very much to know who paid for the grant of the ground. It seems that you are even exceedingly anxious to know it. Why? it does not concern me, but it perplexed me, and I tried to obtain information myself at the municipal office. But the clerks there said it was a maid who brought the money, and she gave a name they didn't recollect—Madame Tartempion or Madame Falempin—no matter. As for myself, I always had an idea that the ground was bought by a woman of society whom Julia once got out of a bad scrape, and I had ended by thinking no more about it; but, behold, on the day before yesterday, I was at liberty—Wladimir had gone to see some Russian trotters at the Palais de l'Industrie—so I went off to Père Lachaise—I had not been there since the funeral—and besides, there are days when it does one good to weep. I climbed to the top of the cemetery—to the right, up against the wall, you know. The weather was wretched. Mud up to my ankles. I spoilt a pair of seventy-franc shoes. I said to myself: 'There will be no one there, and I can pray without being disturbed.' Well, my dear, not at all. I reach the tomb—we all come to it—and I found it already overgrown with grass."

"And you saw?" interrupted Nointel, whom Claudine's philosophical reflections strangely irritated.

"I saw a woman—who had had the same idea as myself, and who had been the first to arrive—a woman leaning on the balustrade which surrounds the grave; when I say leaning, I should say bent in two; she had her face in her hands, and although she had her back towards me, I saw very well that she was sobbing. Her shoulders shook, shook."

"But you recognised her?"

"I took her at first for Cora Darling. She was about her height and figure. Very plainly dressed. A long cloak falling to her heels, a black bonnet, everything very elegant. However, I thought to myself: 'It is very funny that Cora, who has no more heart than a wax doll, should come and weep here in such weather.' With that I approached, I coughed—the lady turned round, and I saw a face which I did not know at all."

"The captain made a gesture of disappointment, and exclaimed: 'You did not speak to her?'"

"Why, yes I did. I said to her: 'Excuse me, madame, don't disturb yourself. There is room for two to weep. Like me, you were, no doubt, the friend of Madame d'Orcival.' My little speech was appropriately worded

enough, but, my dear fellow, it produced a funny effect. Ah! the lady was not long in pulling down her veil."

"At least she replied to you?"

"Not a single word, the rude thing; she didn't even bow, but ran off as fast as she could go. It vexed me so much that I felt like running after her, taking her by the collar of her cloak, and asking for an explanation."

"You would have done quite right."

"Yes, but I was so astonished that I remained there like a noodle; and then, after all, what could I have said to her? She certainly has the right to water the ground she has paid for with her tears, for I would bet a hundred to one, she was the lady who paid for the grant. And, my dear fellow, she was a woman of society; a real one, and of high society."

"You had time to see her face?"

"Oh, perfectly; and I should know it among a thousand. She had blonde hair, a fair complexion, brown eyes, a little nose, a small mouth, and the air of a princess."

"Very good," murmured Nointel, solaced by this description. He had trembled for a moment, fearing he might hear Claudine describe Madame de Barancos.

"How old?" he asked.

"Twenty-two or twenty-three, no more. She was rather tall."

"And you had never seen her before?"

"Never; at least I don't remember having done so. It would seem as if she never went to the Bois, or the theatres, for I go there every day, and she is so pretty that I should certainly have noticed her."

"But if you met her now, would you recognise her?"

"Ah! I should think so."

"Then you can render me one of those services which count in the life of a man. Promise me that, if you meet her, you will follow her until you know where she lives, and who she is."

"I swear it, captain—on condition, that you will tell me why you are so anxious to know her social position."

Nointel sought for an evasive answer, for he did not wish to trust any further the giddy-brained creature who had just furnished him with this valuable information. He was not troubled, however, to invent a story, for Mariette entered, saying half aloud: "Madame, here is monsieur."

"Good!" answered Claudine; "let him wait in the drawing-room. Come, Henri, you don't wish me to present you to Wladimir?"

"Thanks," said the captain, quickly; "I am as busy as though it was my week on duty, and I am off. Think of your promise." And, guided by the maid, he left the apartment without meeting the Muscovite grandee who had given Julia d'Orcival so handsome a funeral.

Nointel went his way, well satisfied with his visit to Claudine Rissler. "One day or other," he said to himself, "Claudine and the unknown woman with the blonde hair will find themselves face to face at a street corner, and I know Claudine: she won't lose her hold, providing she does not make a mistake! There are a good many blondes in Paris."

He reasoned thus while walking down the Boulevard Malesherbes; for, not knowing exactly where to go after his visit, he had dismissed his cab on arriving. He soon perceived that he was as hungry as a wolf, and, as he did not care to show himself at the club before the time he had appointed with Darcy, he entered a restaurant on the Place de la Made-

leine, and did full justice to the repast he ordered. One dines quickly when one dines alone, and it was scarcely eight o'clock when he lit his cigar to go and take a turn on the boulevard. He had some time to lose, to his great regret, and he was asking himself what he should do with it, when he suddenly remembered that M. Roger Darcy seldom failed to attend the performance at the Théâtre Français on Tuesday nights. Gaston himself had often told him that his uncle went there on that day nearly every week. "If I could meet that amiable magistrate there," thought Nointel, "it would be an excellent opportunity for relating my affair to him between two acts. Gaston introduced me to him at the marchioness's ball, so I can perfectly well approach him, and I would rather explain myself to him in a corner of the public lounge than in his office. It isn't a denunciation that I am going to make. I merely wish to announce Madame de Barancos' approaching visit. The Palais de Justice would be much too solemn. In chatting, I will skim over certain delicate points, and if I perceive that he demurs about listening to me, or tries to assume his magisterial air, I will beg of him to summon me as a witness. He is a man of the world and a man of intelligence. He won't be displeased with me for having mixed myself up in a case which interests Gaston, and for having made an investigation as an amateur. And besides I will hand him the famous sleeve-button. That will suffice for him to excuse me, as but for me that piece of evidence would never have reached his hands. Madame Majoré won't be pleased, but I can't help it. My faith! it's decided. I will go to the Français."

These reflections had brought Nointel to the corner of the boulevard and the Rue Scribe. As he passed he gave a glance at the opera house, and as this was not the day for a performance, he was somewhat surprised to see that there were lights in some of the side windows, in those of the performers' dressing rooms, and, further on, in those of the offices of the managers. The idea then came to him that there was a general rehearsal, and that the two sisters Majoré would be there. Now they never went there without their respectable mother, and the captain could not neglect this chance of meeting her. He went up the street, and saw some groups assembled in the courtyard—groups of women young and old. Nointel recognised some among them from having seen them in the green-room. He made inquiries and learnt that a grand examination of the ballet was in question, an exceptional examination, on the stage and in the presence of subscribers. He also learned that Majoré major and minor were among the candidates, that they had just arrived, escorted by their mother. Now or never was the time to approach the box-opener, and he cared little about missing the first act of "Mithridates," which was being performed that evening at the Français. The captain being a subscriber at once obtained admission, and soon reached the slips. The stage was illuminated, but not the house, and the boxes were closed. In the stalls sat the director and some subscribers. The examination of young girls from seven to twelve years of age who figure in certain operas for a franc per evening, while waiting until they pass into the ballet, had just ended. The sisters Majoré who were already in the second division aspired to pass into the first. They were not yet there, and Nointel had some trouble in discovering their mamma. He finally found her seated behind some scenery, fuming because her daughters took so long to dress.

"Good evening, my dear Madame Majoré," said he, in her ear.

The fat woman gave a bounce like a cat who has been lit with a

broom, and turned round in an angry manner. "What, it is you?" she exclaimed. "Lawks! how you frightened me. But, no matter, I am ever so pleased to see you—and, really you ought to have come sooner."

"Yes, I know," replied the captain, smiling. "I found your letter this evening, on returning from a shooting party, and I hastened here. Our supper, then, has caused some talk?"

"Ah! don't speak of it! It is horrible, and if I had known what it would lead to, I should not have gone to your *Café Américain*. I have been told since, that it was no place to take young persons to."

"But, my dear madame, it was your charming daughters who chose it."

"That's true, and I bear you no grudge for it, especially as you have been so kind as to send them each a locket. They have put them on this evening. You will see presently what an effect they have. They make the Roquillon girl mad with jealousy. If you knew all she has said about us. But that would still be nothing, if my husband did not plague me so. Since I was foolish enough to speak to him about the button he sleeps no more. He has read that I could get ten years' hard labour for it. I want to know if there is any good sense in that. They must have put big notions into his head, at his lodge of the Friends of Humanity. And he won't give me any peace till I have seen the magistrate, and given him the gimcrack. You have brought it to me, eh?"

Nointel sought for a reply. The entrance of the young ladies of the second division of the ballet relieved him from his embarrassment. They came in like a hurricane, all in white tarlatan skirts, rose-coloured shoes, lace chemisettes, a flower in their hair, and a black velvet band round their necks, to which was suspended the required locket. Ismérie and Pamela were among this flying squadron, and both of them so excited that they paid no attention to the captain. Mother Majoré threw herself upon her eldest daughter, to tuck up a string which showed itself below her skirt. She now thought of nothing but the examination, and the captain had ample time to prepare what he wished to say to her.

The aspirants for promotion arranged themselves in a single line on the stage, and, all together, commenced the elementary exercises. "Give me your hand," exclaimed the box-opener as she caught Nointel by the wrist and pressed his hand against her robust bosom. "Doesn't my poor heart beat. Ah! the future of those dear girls is in question. Look at them. Are they not pretty?" And Madame Majoré launched forth into numerous technical particulars about their proficiency in dancing.

The captain was not well versed in choregraphical language, and the worthy woman's learned terms astounded him a little. He tried to return to the point in question, and began to despair of leading this tender mother to a reasonable conversation as long as her daughters were on the stage. He accordingly resigned himself to wait till the end of the trial, and so that Madame Majoré should be well disposed, he feigned to take a great interest in tall Ismérie's and little Pamela's skipping. He complimented their mother on their ability, and, in a word, he spoke so well that at the end of the exercise, at the moment when all the young girls took flight like a swarm of white butterflies, Madame Majoré threw herself into his arms crying: "Ah! Monsieur Nointel, I am the happiest of mothers. The manager took notes during the exercises of my little ones. They will pass into the first division. That's sure."

"That news will calm Monsieur Majoré," said the captain in search of a transition to return to a more serious subject.

"Alfred! oh! he is like all the men, he only thinks of himself. It seems that at his lodge there is a question to naming him 'master.' He has nothing but that in his head—that and my affair with the magistrate. And, speaking of my affair——"

"I came expressly to talk with you about it."

"But I haven't time to chat. I must go up and see my daughters, and if you could only give me back the button——"

"For you to take it to the magistrate, eh?"

"Why, yes. Alfred exacts it. It worries me a good deal, for this magistrate will no doubt give me a shaking for having kept the article without saying anything—seeing that he hasn't a very pleasant manner, and that he turns you inside out like a glove when he questions you."

"Don't be afraid. You will find him well disposed towards you."

"You have seen him then?"

"Yes, and I handed him the sleeve-button."

"Ah! heavens, what must he think of me?"

"Why! he considers that we have acted with a prudence worthy of the greatest praise. You know that my friend Darcy is his nephew. He spoke for us, and the affair is arranged."

"What luck! At last, I shall be able to tell Alfred——"

"That you will not be troubled. That goes of itself, but that isn't all. Justice relies on you, Madame Majoré. It knows that you alone can throw light on the mystery which it has so far failed to penetrate. You are not ignorant that the affair has changed in aspect. The person who was arrested at first has been released."

"The authorities have done right. I always told you it was not she. But they have not arrested the man—he who wished to bribe me to be able to enter the box."

"No; the magistrate laid great stress on your opinion. The man was closely examined, but it seems he justified himself. There now remain the women who saw Madame d'Orcival. There were two or three of them."

"Yes. I told you so at the Café Américain."

"Very well, they hold two of them. One of them is certainly the culprit, and it is you who will designate her."

"Me! How so?"

"In this way. It will be a grand test, a decisive test, and it is you who will be the judge. These women will be made to dress themselves in the dominoes they wore at the ball. They will appear before you. They will repeat what they said to you when they asked you to open the door of No. 27 for them. And Monsieur Darcy will rely on your perspicacity, on your intelligence, to indicate to him which of the two entered the last. Ah! it is a fine part you will play there, Madame Majoré."

"I don't say no, Monsieur No'ntel, I don't say no—but, you see, I am not sure of not making a mistake—it occurred already some time ago, this ball affair."

"Monsieur Darcy will refresh your memory. He has learned a good deal since our supper. For instance, he knows that a quarter of an hour before the blow was struck one of the women entered just as the other went out."

"That's true! I remember that."

"Very well, you will recognise them. You will render an immense

service to justice, and an innocent woman will bless your name. Your daughters will have the right to be proud of you."

"And Alfred, too," exclaimed the box-opener in a transport. "I am ready to do what the magistrates expect of me. They can call me when they like." Then interrupting herself: "What is the matter?" she asked of one of the dressing-room attendants who came towards her. "Paméla is taken ill? Ah! my God! I must go—she would eat some cake before the examination—this is what comes of it!—tell the magistrate that he can rely on me." And, leaving Nointel, Madame Majoré darted into the passage leading to the dressing-rooms of the young ladies of the second division.

Nointel did not dream of running after Madame Majoré. That would have been labour lost, for access to the dressing-rooms of the ballet is prohibited even to subscribers. Besides, he had said quite enough to the box-opener since he had calmed her, and reassured her respecting her standing with justice. So he gently glided towards the staircase, and gained the street without drum or trumpet.

His conversation with Madame Majoré had not lasted an hour. It was still sufficiently early to go to the Français, and he went there all the more willingly, as he had just placed himself in a position which compelled him to have a serious conversation with M. Roger Darcy as soon as possible. All that he had announced as done had yet to be done, and if Madame Majoré was ready to make her deposition, M. Darcy was not at all prepared to receive the evidence of this woman whom he had examined once already, without being able to draw any useful information from her. Nointel felt the necessity of preparing him for the news he would hear, and feared that he had gone rather too far, in stating that this magistrate would take the intervention of an intruder in a criminal proceeding in good part. The story of the sleeve button was not a very easy one to present, and the captain did not hide from himself that he had shouldered a somewhat heavy responsibility by confiscating, even temporarily, an important piece of evidence. After all, however, he had acted with good intentions; he had always meant to place this piece of jewellery in the hands of the proper party, one day or other, and, besides, he had an accomplice in this affair, M. Darcy's own nephew, the said nephew having been authorised by his uncle to try to justify Mademoiselle Lestérel.

"I have wronged no one by keeping this button," Nointel said to himself, "and justice can still profit by it. My intentions cannot be suspected, as the use I wished to make of it will be fully shown by the declaration of the marchioness. Then, again, at first the investigation would probably have gone astray, whereas it is now known that the article cannot belong either to Mademoiselle Lestérel or to Madame de Barancos, so, in reality, I have helped the investigation."

Nointel pleaded these extenuating circumstances before the tribunal of his conscience, but he was not absolutely at rest in regard to the result of the step he was about to take with M. Darcy. And, on reaching the Théâtre Français, he began to ask himself if the place was well chosen for so serious a matter. But he promised himself to risk nothing, to act according to circumstances, and he entered.

He had a deal of trouble in procuring a stall, although he was a frequent spectator. The house was full. Every one knows that it is considered the style to go to the Français on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and listen to the masterpieces of the old school. Some fine ladies have owed to this

fortunate fashion the advantage of an acquaintance with Racine and Molière. And wordly people of intelligence are delighted to come and listen in good company to fine language well spoken by excellent comedians. It is a somewhat rare pleasure, at the present time, and, as a rule, Nointel appreciated it infinitely. But on this particular evening he was not disposed to appreciate classical tragedy. Chance had made him a spectator, and almost an actor, in a more exciting drama than "Mithridates," who interested him much less than Madame de Barancos. He had arrived during an intermission, and having ensconced himself as he could in a corner of the stalls, he began studying the house. The assembly was a select one. The seats were overflowing with elegantly dressed ladies. Bouquets of heliotrope and gardenia were displayed on the front of the proscenium boxes, which seemed transformed into flower-baskets. The conversation was carried on in a low tone, as if in a drawing-room; the old subscribers regretted Rachel, the elegant ladies discussed the "Fourchambaults," and no one spoke of politics.

The captain did not perceive M. Roger Darcy. On the other hand, however, he discovered Claudine Rissler, flanked by her Russian, on the first tier. She had arrayed herself in a dress of Hortensia satin, which attracted every eye, and did not cease moving her pretty head, so as to make the diamonds hanging from her ears sparkle in the light. Wladimir was really superb with his long silvered whiskers, and his air of a drum-major. Opera-glasses were constantly directed upon them, and there were people who sneered at this badly-matched couple. Nointel did not stop to examine them, but continued passing the boxes in review. Although he went but little into society, he knew Paris sufficiently well to be able to name most of the faces. He looked everywhere for M. Darcy, and at last he ended by finding him. The magistrate occupied a side box with Madame Cambry. This was the first time Nointel had met the charming widow of the Avenue Eylau at the theatre, and the regular Tuesday night spectators were not accustomed to seeing her there; so that she had become the target of numerous opera-glasses. Dressed in black, as usual, she wore a profusion of old lace upon her dress. Not a jewel. A real mourning costume, which was marvellously suited to her style of beauty. She chatted with M. Darcy, and from the expression of their faces it was evident that the subject of their conversation was a serious one.

The opportunity seemed a good one to the captain for approaching Gaston's uncle. The gracious reception extended to him by Madame Cambry at the ball sufficiently authorised him to go and salute her in her box, and also to ask her for news of Mademoiselle Lestérel. This duty once fulfilled, Nointel relied upon leaving the box at the same time as M. Darcy, who, perhaps, was only there on a visit, and he meant to propose a turn in the public lounge to him, and to attack the delicate question not far from the bust of Regnard. To put this hastily-conceived project into operation, Nointel at once left the stalls and ascended to the first tier. To do this took some little time, as the stairs and corridors were crowded. He also had some trouble in again finding the box, the number of which was unknown to him. It was even necessary for him to enter the gallery to accomplish this, and from this point he saw that Madame Cambry was now alone. M. Roger Darcy had left the box while Nointel was making his way along the passages, and Nointel, who regretted not having met him, would willingly have started in pursuit; but the widow

espied him, and looked at him with a smile which was equivalent to an invitation. He could no longer avoid entering the box, and he went there without hesitation. Madame Cambry received him with an earnestness which seemed of good augury, and she herself approached the point to which he wished to lead her. "Monsieur Darcy has this moment left me," she said. "He would have been delighted to have met you. He has been looking for you for two days. But he is in the house, in the stalls, and you will certainly see him before the close of the performance."

"I will make every effort to do so, madame, and I am sorry I missed him. I went yesterday to shoot——"

"At Madame de Barancos', no doubt?"

"Yes, madame, and I returned this evening. Madame de Barancos had a deal of company, however, and she herself does not return till to-morrow. I shortened my visit because I was anxious to see my friend Gaston."

"He also is looking for you. He has a service to ask of you."

"I found a note from him on arriving, and hastened to his residence. He had gone out, however, and I did not know where to join him. I came here in the vague hope of finding him. But I hope that he will call at the club about midnight."

"I don't know if you will see him there. He is so sad that he avoids society."

"Sad! But it seems to me that he has more reason to rejoice. Mademoiselle Lestérel is free. The order of discharge will soon be signed."

"It is not signed yet. Monsieur Darcy hesitates about doing so. He needs a culprit. He is a judge before all else, and has ideas which I do not share. But it is not only this delay which grieves his nephew. Events have transpired recently—which no one could have foreseen."

"What, then, has happened?"

"I am told that you know Berthe's brother-in-law, Monsieur Crozon, and you are no doubt aware that, warned by anonymous letters, he accused his wife of having deceived him."

"Between you and me, he wasn't wrong. I can well say so now, and Monsieur Roger Darcy must know it, for in that lies Mademoiselle Lestérel's complete justification."

"He knows it. I took it upon myself to inform him of what Berthe avowed to me. The poor child sacrificed herself for her sister. It was to recover some letters written by her sister that she went to the ball at the opera house; it was to place the child of this sister in safety from the search of—I don't know whom—that she ran about the streets during that fatal night."

"I had divined all this. Gaston also had divined it, and he must have been enraptured on acquiring the certainty that Mademoiselle Lestérel was innocent. All is for the best, then, for I succeeded in calming the husband, and peace returned to the Crozon household."

"You could not have foreseen the blow which has struck your friend. I saw Berthe on the day she left prison; I accompanied her to her sister's. And there—it is an unheard-of fatality—the nurse to whom Berthe had confided the child came. There was a terrible scene—the husband wished to kill the child, and, to save it, Berthe declared that it was hers."

"That was sublime! heroic!"

"Alas! this heroism will cost her dear. She has been obliged to carry the falsehood to the end—to do all she would have done if she were really the mother—she is condemned to bring up the child. That means prospective dishonour."

"Yes, I had not thought of that. But nothing prevents the secret from being kept. Crozon has no interest in causing his sister-in-law's ruin. He will be silent. Besides, he will not always be in Paris. He is a sailor, and now that he no longer suspects his wife, he will go back to sea one of these days. Then something can be done. Why should the child not be sent abroad? Why should Madame Crozon not write to her husband that it is dead? It is for her to save the honour of Mademoiselle Lestérel who has saved her life. She will find the means."

"She should not have accepted the sacrifice," said Madame Cambry quickly. "What do you think of a woman who is cowardly enough to suffer her sister to go to the assizes, when with one word she could justify her? Her husband would have killed her, you may say; but there are positions in which it is necessary to know how to die."

"She lacked courage, that is true, but I excuse her," murmured Nointel. "She is a woman."

"I also am a woman, and I swear to you that if I had a weakness to reproach myself with, I should have sufficient resolution to bear the consequences." Madame Cambry said this in a tone which somewhat surprised the captain. Her voice was agitated, and her eyes glistened. One would have said that she had a fever. "However," she continued, more calmly, "it is not of Madame Crozon that I ought to talk, but of poor Berthe. She is menaced in what is most dear to her—in her love. She wished that Monsieur Gaston Darcy should be informed of what had taken place, and she carried abnegation so far as to release him from his promise. Gaston has refused to be released; he protests that his sentiments have not changed, but the blow is struck. I read his heart, and am certain that he suffers horribly—that he has doubts."

"He has lost his mind, then!" exclaimed the captain. "Mademoiselle Lestérel's conduct is as clear as daylight. It is materially impossible that she could be the mother of the child. Did she not appear all winter in the drawing-rooms where she sang? It is necessary to arrive from the Southern Ocean, like this man Crozon, to believe in the pious fraud she has put forward. And that is where the danger lies. If this whaleman should take it into his head to make an investigation, he would very soon discover the truth. I must even forestall him, prevent him from doing this. I have some influence over him, and I shall perhaps succeed in persuading him to resume navigation. However, I cannot understand how Gaston can go astray to this point."

"You have never loved, then?" asked Madame Cambry.

"Not to the extent of marrying," replied the captain, laughing.

"If you have loved, you know the torments of jealousy, the torture of doubt and suspicion. Your friend at this moment endures all those sufferings. And Berthe is too proud to try to exculpate herself. In fact, she has resolved to declare to Monsieur Roger Darcy, when he questions her for the last time, that the child is hers. Monsieur Darcy will not believe a word of it, but he will be obliged to make a note of this declaration."

"It is a misfortune, no doubt. But Gaston knows the truth of the matter, and I will charge myself with bringing him back to more healthy ideas."

"May you succeed! I perceive his uncle in the stalls. He has seen you, and is making me a sign that he is coming up here. He is very anxious to have an interview with you as soon as possible."

Nointel looked down into the house, and saw M. Roger Darcy making his way out. He also saw that Claudine Rissler was giving herself up to a singular pantomime in her box, which was not far off. She looked at him with expressive glances, and called him by little oft repeated movements of the head. She seemed to be saying to him: "Come quickly, I have something to tell you." "What fly is biting her?" the captain asked himself, while gazing with indifference at Claudine's manœuvres. "Can she imagine I am going there to be introduced to Wladimir! Ah! I have something else in my head."

"They are about to commence the third act of 'Mithridates,'" said Madame Cambry. "You will be badly off here if you have something to say to Monsieur Darcy. Even by speaking in a low tone you would offend the spectators, who have come to listen to Racine's lines."

Nointel took the ball on the bounce. "I think," he replied, quickly, "that I shall do as well to go and meet Monsieur Darcy, unless, however, you are anxious to see him immediately."

"Not the least in the world. We are ~~not~~ yet married, and it would not be proper for him to establish himself in my box during a whole performance. I can only admit him here on visits. He has just made me a somewhat long one, and I expect he will return here at the next *entr'acte*. Between then and now you will have time to converse on a subject which interests you both, and I hope he will bring you back here when your conversation is over."

"Then, since you authorise me to do so, madame, I will take leave of you for a few moments."

Madame Cambry smiled in approval, and the captain at once profited by the permission granted him. He had not taken more than a dozen steps along the corridor when he met the investigating magistrate. "I am glad to find you, sir," said M. Darcy courteously. "I left my stall expressly."

"And I Madame Cambry's box, where I presented myself just now in the hope of meeting you," retorted the captain. "We passed each other on the way."

"No doubt. Are you very anxious to listen to the third act?"

"I should infinitely prefer to chat with you."

"Then let us go into the lounge."

This was precisely what Nointel wished, and he followed M. Roger Darcy. On passing the box occupied by Claudine Rissler, he saw that the door was ajar, and that Claudine was watching for him to pass. Not caring to enter into a colloquy with her, he averted his head, and she had the discretion not to call him, although she was dying with the desire to do so. The lounge was as deserted as one could wish for a private conversation. "Well, sir," commenced the magistrate, "you are my nephew's most intimate friend, and you were very willing to help him in the task he undertook—a difficult and delicate task—since its object was to demonstrate the innocence of a person under suspicion, whom all appearances accused. It has been proved, however, that Mademoiselle Lestérel was no longer at the opera house at the time the murder was committed. It has none the less been proved however, that she went there to recover some compromising letters which were in the hands of

Julia Berthier, and that ought to suffice to prevent Gaston from carrying out a project of marriage which I disapprove of. But he is the master of his actions, and I do not pretend to impose my wishes upon him. It is not of him that I wish to talk to you; it is of another person."

"I also wish to talk to you of another person," said the captain, quietly."

"My nephew made a strange disclosure to me yesterday," continued M. Darcy; "he had already told me several times that you believed you were on the track of the woman who entered the box after Mademoiselle Lestérel. He even went so far as to inform me that your suspicions rested upon a person of high society. I admit that I had not taken his insinuations seriously. But Gaston ended by revealing to me an important fact. The box-opener whom I questioned at the commencement of the affair, and from whom I could only draw incoherent declarations—this box-opener, it appears, found in the box, near Julia Berthier's corpse, a sleeve-button bearing an initial, and you took possession of this object."

"That is perfectly correct," replied Nointel, coolly.

The magistrate straightened himself up, and assumed an expression of great severity. "And so, sir," he said, "you thought that it was allowable for you to substitute yourself to the judge charged with the investigation of a murder. You have thereby committed, I ought to inform you, if you are ignorant of it, a veritable usurpation of functions."

"I admit it, sir. I thought that there were cases in which the end justified the means."

"The end? What could be your object in seizing upon a tangible piece of evidence which might effectually aid the officers of the law?"

"I meant to make use of it to compel the guilty one to confess her crime."

"The guilty one! you know her then?"

"I thought I knew her."

"And you were mistaken, no doubt?"

"Yes, I suspected the Marchioness de Barancos. I submitted her to a decisive test, and I have acquired the certainty of her innocence. To-morrow she will tell you what she has done, and on what grounds I accused her."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, I left her a few hours ago at her château at Sandouville, and she requested me to announce her visit to you. Allow me, now, sir, to hand you this piece of jewellery which I have had the fault to keep too long."

M. Darcy took the gold button offered him by Nointel with a certain amount of hesitation, but he examined it closely. "It is strange," he murmured. "It seems to me that this is not the first time I have seen it."

"It is of peculiar form—very recognisable," said the captain, "and it is allowable to hope that one will discover to whom it belongs."

The magistrate did not reply; he was reflecting. "In truth sir," he commenced, after a somewhat long spell of silence, "I ought not to receive it at your hands. The Code of Criminal Procedure does not authorise a magistrate to proceed in such a way. Nothing guarantees to me the authenticity of this object—nothing but your statement. I must warn you that I shall summon the box-opener, and that you will also be called—called at the same time as her,"

"That is precisely what I desire, and to-morrow Madame de Barancos will ask you, like myself, to be confronted with this woman."

"Madame de Barancos! And why?"

"Because she entered Julie Berthier's box after Mademoiselle Lestérel; because she saw a woman enter it after herself; because she will recall some circumstances to the box-opener which that stupid creature had forgotten, and which will put you on the track of the unknown woman who struck the blow."

"Come, come, sir," said the astounded magistrate, "will you please explain yourself more clearly. You speak to me of things which I hear talked of to-day for the first time. I have the right, and it is my duty, to ask you to give reasons for your statements. We are not in my office here, but you have no need to take an oath to tell the truth, and I am in a hurry to know it."

"As for me, I am in a hurry to reveal it," replied the captain; "and since you are willing to listen to me now—this evening—I will tell you briefly all I know:—The starting-point of this sad affair is Golyminé's suicide. That adventurer, before killing himself, had no doubt placed in Madame d'Orcival's hands the letters which had been written to him by three women, successively his mistresses."

"Three?" cried M. Darcy in surprise.

"Yes, three. You can question Mariette, Julia's former maid, on this point. She also has recovered her memory. She remembers now, that on starting for the ball at the opera house, her mistress took with her some letters done up in three packets. There are, besides, other proofs, which you will see. The three women who wrote the letters were Madame Crozon, the sister of Mademoiselle Lestérel——"

"There is no doubt about that in my mind."

"The Marchioness de Barancos——"

"She has admitted this to you?"

"She did so this morning; and she will soon repeat the admission to you. She had long ceased seeing Golyminé, who had basely betrayed her, and who had always refused to restore her letters to her. On the day following his death, however, Madame d'Orcival wrote to the marchioness offering to return her correspondence to her. The marchioness went to the rendezvous. She arrived at the ball at half-past one. That I can bear witness to, for by accident I recognised her just as she arrived."

"And it was this accident which put you upon the track you have followed."

"Exactly. As soon as Madame de Barancos presented herself she was received by Julia, who awaited her. Mademoiselle Lestérel had just gone away. She had left in Julia's hands the poniard hid in a fan."

"I know that. Madame Cambry prompted Mademoiselle Lestérel's avowals, and everything goes to show that matters took place just as the young girl states."

"The interview between Julia and Madame de Barancos was a long and stormy one. Julia suspected the marchioness of wishing to marry Gaston."

"My nephew!"

"Yes; and she threatened to ruin the marchioness if the marriage took place—a marriage of which the marchioness had never dreamed——"

"Nor Gaston, either."

"Finally, however, Julia became calm. She returned the letters, and

Madame de Barancos went off. It was then half-past two. Just as she came out of the box a woman in a domino, who was waiting in the corridor, advanced quickly, spoke in a low tone to the box-opener, and entered the box—this was a woman who had already been there, who had preceded the marchioness there——”

“That box-opener did not say so.”

“She will tell it to you when you question her again. And if you consent to the test which Madame de Barancos will propose to you, if you think proper to submit Mademoiselle Lestérel to the same trial, the truth will instantly be made evident.”

“What test?”

“Madame de Barancos will again dress herself in the domino and the lace veil she wore at the ball. Mademoiselle Lestérel will put on the mask and domino which are in your hands, and which have been recognised by the party she purchased them of. The two women will be brought into the presence of the box-opener, who will then remember that the woman with the mask came at one o'clock and remained in the box but ten minutes; that the veiled woman came at half-past one and left at half-past two; and that, finally, between the first and second visit, a third woman entered and went away; that this third woman re-appeared after half-past two, and that she ultimately left the box at a quarter to three. This one also had been Golyminé's mistress; she also had come in search of her letters. Did Julia return them to her, or did this woman take them from Julia's corpse? I cannot speak on that point, but it is evident that it was she who killed Julia.”

“Yes, it is evident, providing the box-opener is not again mistaken, and that Madame de Barancos tells the truth.”

“If Madame de Barancos had wished to lie, nothing would have obliged her to confess that Golyminé had been her lover, nothing would have obliged her to return me the sleeve-button——”

“You had given it to her?”

“I showed it to her suddenly at the ball at her house, while dancing the cotillion—I thought her emotion would betray her—she thought I offered her a *souvenir* of myself, and she took it; four days later she wore it on her bosom before forty persons, and when I told her that it had been picked up out of Julia's blood, she threw it back with horror, and bade me bring it to you. Do you think she would have acted in this way if she were guilty?”

“No,” said M. Darcy, in a state of agitation. “It is not she—it is not Mademoiselle Lestérel—and I see it all now; the investigation must be begun over again. God grant that it may succeed!”

“Why shouldn't this third woman be found? For my own part I am looking for her. I have gathered some indications——”

At this moment the lounge was overrun. The act had just finished, and the spectators scattered through the corridors. “Come, sir,” resumed the magistrate. “I rely on your assistance, and I beg of you to come and see me at my residence to-morrow morning. We will resume the conversation which we can no longer continue here. You have made me acquainted with so many things that I need to collect myself before giving a new direction to this strange affair. I am now going to join Madame Cambry, and will detain you no longer.”

Nointel bowed, and he was about to leave the lobby, and the theatre as well, when he found himself face to face with Chandine, hanging on the

arm of her Russian grandee. The captain stood aside to let them pass, but Madame Rissler did not thus understand it. She let go of Wladimir without any ceremony, and, drawing Nointel a step or two aside, said to him: "Ah! so you know her, then?"

"Who?" asked Nointel.

"The fair-haired woman of Père-Lachaise cemetery, of course. You have just been chatting with her for twenty minutes."

"Are you becoming crazy?"

"None of your jokes, now! You know her better than I do, since you remained in her box during the whole of the last *entr'acte*. So you did not see the signs I made you. I called you when you passed down the corridor. But you were with a gentleman whom I saw in the box with the blonde. He hasn't a very good-natured look, that tall, dry man. Is he her husband?"

"Little one," said Nointel, "I tell you you are mistaken. It wasn't that lady you saw at Père Lachaise."

"But I tell you that I am sure of it. I knew her by her eyes, by her hair, by everything. Look here, do you wish me to go and speak to her? You would see the face she would put on if I asked her why she ran so fast along the walks of the cemetery."

"No, no. I beg of you to keep still."

"Do you wish me to follow her when she leaves the theatre? Wladimir will grumble, but it is all the same to me."

"It is useless. I know her, and it is because I know her that I answer you that you have taken her for some one else."

Claudine looked at the captain in a cunning manner, and exclaimed: "Good! I have it. You are in love with her. Ah! ah! If I had known it, I should have said nothing, for I can understand that it annoys you to learn that your princess has had anything to do with me or Julia. Julia had perhaps rendered her a service."

"Be quiet. You haven't any common sense," said Nointel, impatiently.

"Ah! that is the way you take it. I am going then. I have kept Wladimir waiting long enough. Good evening, captain; amuse yourself well, but, believe me, return to the brunettes, they are less deceitful." With this arrow, discharged after the manner of the Parthians, Madame Rissler took her flight, and Nointel heard her say to her Russian: "That is a journalist, my dear. One has always need of those people when one intends to come out on the stage."

The captain would willingly have thrashed her, and he went rapidly away so as not to yield to the temptation. Ten seconds later he thought no more of the strange information he had just received. He could not believe it. Madame Cambry weeping on Madame d'Orival's tomb, that was too absurd. The extravagant chatterbox who accused her must have been deceived by a resemblance, and Nointel regretted having urged her to look for the woman she had seen at Père Lachaise, for she was quite capable of injuring a person whom he and his friend Gaston had every interest in sparing. Madame Cambry exercised great influence over M. Roger Darcy: she had a clear mind, and a firmness of character which would be a great help to Berthe Lestérel, and also to Madame de Barancos, for the captain proposed explaining the situation to her, and hiding nothing from her; he meant to ask for her support, and he hoped that she would second him in inducing M. Darcy to leave the marchioness out of the case.

"It is necessary," he said to himself, as he was putting on his overcoat, "it is necessary that I should warn this amiable and intelligent widow of the danger to which she is exposed by Clandine's foolish mistake. It is a somewhat delicate step, but there is a way of telling everything. Now, I have nothing to do but to calm Gaston. He *must* be in a condition! I see him from here, and I bet that he is sending me to all the fiends. To suspect Mademoiselle Lestrel of being the mother of a clandestine child is the height of insanity. I will try to cure him by an energetic treatment. The thing is to know if he will submit to treatment. He will certainly kick when I declare to him that Madame de Barancos is as innocent as Berthe. It would be still worse if he knew I was in love with the marchioness, but I shall take care not to tell him that."

It was past eleven o'clock when the captain left the Théâtre Français, still a little too early to go to the club, since he had made an appointment for midnight with the unfortunate friend whom he wished to comfort. But his day's work was done, as is said vulgarly, and he was not sorry to rest from his labours in an arm-chair at the corner of the club fire. He took a cab and was driven straight to the Boulevard.

When he reached the club, the red-room was deserted. No chatterers around the fireplace; no players at the whist tables. Two or three frequenters sleeping on the stuffed benches—of the class of members who come every evening for economy's sake, to be lighted and warmed gratuitously. That was all. Suspecting that gambling was going on, Nointel passed along the passage to the secluded room, habitually consecrated to *lucarat*. He here found a numerous gathering, over which Gaston Darcy presided. He was dealing, and had before him quite a respectable pile of gold, without counting a certain number of cards bearing a figure and a signature. He had his back towards the door, and did not see Nointel, who went quietly and stood behind him, to the great displeasure of the players. He was accused of bringing luck to the banker. Every variety of fetichism was represented here. The gathering comprised atheists, who believed in the virtue of a toothpick or of a hair ring. Some of them, before coming to the club, had walked for an hour on the boulevard, with the sole object of meeting a hunchback and touching his hump. Others would only play with their hats on. Lieutenant Tréville had put on spectacles, although he had excellent eyes. Charmol whistled an air of the "Caveau," while shuffling the cards. Colonel Tartaras swallowed a glass of rum after each deal. Less superstitious and more redoubtable, were the financier, Verpel, Major Cocktail, and Alfred Lenvers, the last-named of whom never played except on his hand. They lost, however, for Darcy had a superb bank. The most extraordinary strokes resulted to his profit, and he acted throughout with so much indifference that he exasperated the players. There was a perfect concert of imprecations against him. "That is what it is to have heart troubles," thought the captain. "Unlucky in love, lucky at cards."

The deal finished without Darcy perceiving his friend's presence. Instead of counting his gains, or helping to shuffle the cards, he meditated, munching an unlit cigar. It was plainly to be seen that his thoughts were a hundred leagues from the green cloth. Verpel, vexed at having lost, proposed meanwhile to put the bank up at auction, and offered to take it for five hundred louis. Major Cocktail at once went to a thousand. "I make it two thousand louis," said Gaston, coldly. The sum was a round

one, and no one dared outbid it, so that the bank remained to the last of the Darcys.

"He plays a game that might ruin him in one night," said Nointel to himself. "A pretty way to prepare for housekeeping. He must have gone mad."

The new deal commenced much less fortunately than the one which had preceded it. The three first hands took four hundred louis from the banker, and the players who but just now cursed the captain began to look upon him with softening eyes. Decidedly instead of bringing Darcy good luck, he brought him just the contrary. Finding that this continued, and that Gaston was completely reckless, the captain considered that the time had come to try to stop him on the road to the poorhouse. "My word of honour," he said aloud, "one would believe one's self in Charenton. So all of you have six hundred thousand francs a-year, like the Marchioness de Barancos?"

On hearing his friend's voice, Gaston quickly turned. "At last you are here!" he exclaimed. And leaving the fresh cards a valet had just placed before him, he rose saying: "Decidedly, I give up the bank. To a stronger one, gentlemen."

There were loud murmurs. The players, enraged at seeing a daring banker throw up the game, growled like dogs from whom their prey is torn. "It's a great pity," said Alfred Lenvers, in a low tone to his neighbour, the major. "This time we had him good. May the devil fly away with Nointel!"

Darcy let them growl, however, and quickly led the captain into a little vacant parlour. "Why do you play in such a way as to bring yourself to poverty?" asked Nointel, in a tone of reproach.

"To divert my thoughts," replied Gaston, bluntly. "Rest easy, I shall never come to poverty; for before coming to that, I will blow out my brains."

"And all this because Mademoiselle Lestérel has taken her sister's child for her own."

"Who told you that?"

"Madame Cambry, whom I have just seen at the Français."

"And you think that the child is Madame Crozon's?"

"Of course I do! How can you doubt it? The wind which blows across the Rue Caumartin has rendered you mad, then? Is it necessary to bring you back to more healthy ideas, for me to conduct you to the midwife who attended the whaleman's spouse? The illustrious Simancas has given me her address. She lives in the Rue des Rosiers, at Montmartre."

"And you hid this from me?"

"My dear fellow, I was right in not keeping you informed of my doings, because you get excited over nothing. If I had told you day by day of the incidents which occurred, you would have lost your head completely, whereas now you have only half lost it."

"Well, yes, I was mad—and am so still—and shall be so until we have found the woman who killed Julia. You can't imagine what I suffer from the mysteries of this affair. My uncle puts me to torture every day. He no longer disputes Berthe's innocence of the murder, but he unceasingly repeats to me that her conduct isn't clear; that he will be compelled to resort to an examination of her sister and her sister's husband."

"If he does that, instead of one murder, there will be two, and perhaps three. Crozon will kill the mother and probably the child. But your

uncle won't do it. He talks like that to you to lead you to reflect before concluding a marriage which displeases him. However, let us speak of something else. I have just arrived from Madame de Barancos' château."

"Well?" asked Gaston, quickly.

"Well, my dear fellow—Ah! once more we are to be disturbed."

A footman had just entered, and he came forward, with a letter on a silver salver. "The person who brought this note, sir, did not wish to wait for an answer," he said, presenting the salver to Nointel, "but she requested that it might be handed to you as soon as you arrived."

The captain took the letter, with a shrug of the shoulders, sent the servant away, and prepared to open it. "It is curious," he murmured, after glancing at the address. "We were talking about Crozon, and I think I recognise his writing. What the deuce has he so urgent to inform me of? Unless he has killed his wife!"

"Read it," said Darcy, impatiently. "I am in a hurry to know what you did at the marchioness's."

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed Nointel, after reading rapidly. "Here is something new, and I did not think I predicted so correctly. Listen to what Mademoiselle Lestérel's brother-in-law writes to me:—'My dear captain—At whatever moment you receive this note, come to my residence immediately—this I beg of you in the name of friendship. My wife is dying, and she wishes to see you before she dies. She also wishes to see Monsieur Gaston Darcy; bring him with you if you can. I rely on you. Do not abandon your unfortunate friend, Jacques Crozon.'"

"She wishes to see me. Me!" exclaimed Darcy. "She wishes to see me in the presence of her husband, who does not know me! What does that mean?"

"It is perhaps her sister who asked her to have you come," replied Nointel. Then, after reflecting: "No," he continued, "another idea comes to me. Madame Crozon, feeling her end approaching, wishes to recommend Mademoiselle Lestérel to you; to beg of you to marry her, and to swear to you that she is worthy of you. Hum! before the man she has deceived, that will be pretty strong. Whatever it may be, I am going, and you cannot very well decline going with me."

"Let us start," said Gaston, without hesitation.

They quickly descended to the boulevard, sprang into Darcy's brougham, which was waiting at the door of the club, and were driven to the Rue Caumartin in a few minutes. They talked but little on the way, for they were both absorbed in serious reflections. However, just as they were leaving the carriage, Gaston asked: "The marchioness is guilty; is it not so?"

"Innocent, my friend; as innocent of the murder as Mademoiselle Lestérel is. When we leave here, I will tell you all."

That was not the time to insist. Darcy kept silent and followed the captain, who was speaking with the door-keeper. This man stated that Madame Crozon had suddenly been seriously attacked, and that a doctor and a priest had been sent for. They had just left, and the doctor had said that the sick woman would not survive the night. The priest was to return to administer the last sacrament. As he was awaited, the staircase was lighted up. Furnished with this information, the two friends climbed in all haste to the fourth floor, and were received by M. Crozon, who threw himself into Nointel's arms and extended his hand to Darcy. The reception was a good augury, and the captain tried to obtain a preliminary explana-

tion, but the whaleman said to him hastily: "Come in—quick. In a moment, perhaps, it will be too late." And he pushed them into a room dimly lighted by a lamp covered with a shade.

The pale face of the dying woman stood out white and ghastly against the dark background of the curtains. Berthe Lestérel was on her knees at the foot of the bed, praying. She did not raise her head at the slight noise made by the two visitors escorted by her brother-in-law. But Madame Crozon straightened herself up on the pillows which supported her, and made a sign for them to approach. "You too," she murmured, directing a supplicating look at her husband. Crozon obeyed, and she then commenced speaking thus: "I have just made my reconciliation with God. I have received absolution, and, in receiving it, I promised to publicly confess my faults. I have promised to ask forgiveness of my husband, whom I have injured, and of my beloved sister, who has exposed her life and her honour to save me from the fate I deserved. Yes, I have been guilty; yes, I basely deceived the best, the most generous of men."

Nointel could not but look stealthily at the unfortunate Crozon, and he saw by the whaleman's agitated features that he was making unheard-of efforts to control himself. Berthe sobbed.

"I am without excuse," continued the dying woman; "my husband only thought of making me happy. It was to make me rich that he braved the dangers of the sea; and if I was left alone during this fatal year, if he undertook a last campaign, it was because he thought I suffered from the modest circumstances in which we lived. God is my witness that I did not urge him to go away, that I did not premeditate taking advantage of his absence and the confidence he placed in me. Everything was due to chance—to chance and my weakness. I was not able to resist the infatuations of a guilty passion—I fell into the snare set for me by a seducer—he is dead, and I also am about to die—the punishment had not long to be awaited."

At this point, the voice of the unfortunate woman, who thus accused herself, failed her, and there was a lugubrious silence in the chamber of death. Mademoiselle Lestérel repressed her tears, and looked with anguish at her sister.

"I do not regret life," continued Madame Crozon; "but before appearing before the Supreme Judge I wish, as far as I am able, to make reparation for the evil I have caused, and I humbly beg my husband to allow me to tell the truth in his presence. The child whom Berthe claimed, in order to save its life—that child is mine. It is innocent, and I ask mercy for it." Crozon made a gesture, which evidently signified: "I grant it;" and his wife gave him a look of gratitude which stirred the depths of his soul. "My daughter will live, then?" she murmured. "I should also like to live to redeem my faults by submission and devotion. I should like to live to be your slave. But God has disposed of me, and my hours are numbered. I thank Him for having given me time to repent, and to rehabilitate my sister. The magistrate who set her at liberty is not here, but his nephew will repeat my words to him—he will tell him that, just as I was dying, I swore on my eternal salvation that Berthe did not commit the horrible crime of which she was accused. Berthe went to the ball at the opera house to recover my letters; she did not remain there; she hastened to the residence of the nurse. She was far away when some wretched woman stabbed Madame d'Orival—a woman who had also written some letters, and who, to prevent Madame

d'Orcival from talking, did not recoil from committing a crime. She will not escape justice. Berthe's innocence will be plainly shown some day; but who will restore her lost happiness to her? Who will protect her against calumny?"

"I, if she will consent to be my wife," said Darcy, quickly.

"Ah! I can die now," sighed Madame Crozon.

"And your child shall be ours," continued Darcy, with an emotion which made his voice tremble.

"My child! You will adopt it?"

"I promise it!"

"Bless you!—you who bring me the only consolation which I am permitted to hope for in this world. I will pray for you in the next, if God has mercy on me." The dying woman stopped. The effort had exhausted her. Her head fell back upon her pillow; her eyes closed; her mouth murmured a few more unintelligible words. Was this the death struggle? Berthe thought so. She rose, and ran to her unfortunate sister.

"Come," breathed Nointel, pressing his friend's arm. "Come, our place is no longer here." Darcy resisted a little, but Crozon interposed: "Come!" And he took them from the room.

"Courage!" said the captain to him.

"I have it," replied the sailor. "I needed it to listen to what I have just heard. I needed it to forgive. But I do not regret what I have done." While speaking thus he raised his head, and his energetic face expressed the conviction of duty accomplished. His eyes glistened. He was almost handsome.

"You are a worthy man," exclaimed Nointel.

"Thanks," replied Crozon, simply. "In moments like these, the approbation of a true friend does one good. Thanks also to you, sir, who have the generosity to extend your hand to Berthe, and not to abandon her sister's child."

"You do not think of killing it, I hope," said Nointel, quickly.

"No more than I think of killing her mother, if she should escape approaching death. There is but one being on earth on whom I wish to be revenged."

"The wretch who has caused so much unhappiness, the cowardly scoundrel who wrote you the anonymous letters, eh? Well, you can kill him. I now know him. He is a Spanish-American, who pretends to be a general in the Peruvian service and who is named, or calls himself, Simancas."

"Good. I am glad he is not a Frenchman. You will be my second. Adieu."

The two friends did not seek to prolong a painful conversation. They were anxious to be able to exchange their impressions freely.

"Poor woman?" said Nointel, as soon as Crozon had closed the door of the apartment upon them. "She has just redeemed her whole past life in five minutes. If she had not made that heroic confession, you would still be in doubt as to Mademoiselle Lestérel's virtue. It is a great pity that the examining magistrate did not hear it. But he must know it, and he shall know it as early as to-morrow. Now that the husband is fully informed, we are no longer under the necessity of withholding anything. We will acquaint Monsieur Darcy with the scene we have just beheld, and will beg of him to call Crozon as a witness."

"Yes," murmured Darcy, "I hope that my uncle will at last consent to acknowledge that he has been mistaken. But he will never go so far as to approve of my marriage with Mademoiselle Lestérel."

"Well, so much the worse for him. I fully approve of it, since I know the worth of Mademoiselle Lestérel, and I declare to you that, were I in your place, I should get married at mid-day, at the grand altar of the Madeleine, and treat all foolish opinions with scorn. I also think you are right in providing for Golymine's child, only I sincerely hope that you will cease to cultivate *baccarat*. Your fortune has already been sufficiently encroached upon, and you have no longer an inheritance to look forward to."

"That's all right. Talk to me about this marchioness. My uncle won't stop till he has found the culprit, and I thought she was this culprit. You also thought so. But you have just told me that you had completely changed your opinion, that she has nothing to reproach herself with——"

"My dear fellow, I cannot talk against my conscience and denounce Madame de Barancos, merely to make myself agreeable to your uncle. Besides, I have seen him this evening, and have told him what I think of her. Further, she will call to see him to-morrow, and will make him as complete a confession as Madame Crozon's. She will tell him that she went to Julia's box to recover the letters she had written to Golymine, for she acknowledges that the count had been her lover, and that she had been infatuated with him."

"Never mind that, but if the marchioness didn't kill Julia, who did?"

"A third woman who entered the box. Madame de Barancos saw her, masked, it is true, but she will give a description of her height and figure. I have also chatted with Madame Majoré this evening. Her memory is beginning to return to her; she will be brought into the presence of the marchioness, and I guarantee that after that, Monsieur Roger Darcy will be perfectly convinced that the female assassin is yet to be found. Will he find her? That I know nothing about. But he will owe apologies to Mademoiselle Lestérel, and as he is a gallant man he will offer her, perhaps, by way of indemnity, his consent to your marriage. All then will be for the best, I shall be the only one to suffer."

"You!" cried Gaston, in amazement.

"Yes, I. I have no motive for hiding from you that I love the marchioness, that she loves me, and that this lamentable affair will no doubt separate us for ever. However, that is enough about my affairs, and here we are at the foot of the staircase. Drive home. I shall return on foot, for I feel the need of a walk."

"And so you are in love with Madame de Barancos," murmured Darcy, as he passed out of the house.

"Yes," replied Nointel, frankly. "It is the first time I have met with such an adventure. Let us hope that I shall come out of it without too much damage. And, above all, don't imagine that my passion has blinded me in regard to the marchioness's conduct. I still see very clearly in that direction, even too clearly. She has had a lover to be ashamed of, but she has killed no one."

"And that button which was found near the corpse, it isn't hers, then?" asked Darcy quickly, suddenly seized with returning recollection.

"No more hers than Mademoiselle Berthe's. I have just given it to your uncle. May he discover to whom it belongs! As for me, I give it up. Good evening. We will see each other to-morrow."

VII.

MADAME CAMBRY'S mansion in the Avenue d'Eylau might have been a convent, so quiet was the life which the widow led, and so severe the regulations of the household. The servants, all of long service, obeyed Dame Jacinthe, a discreet and respectable person, and a widow like her mistress, whose wet nurse she had formerly been, and whom she had never left. She had the face, the character, and the talents of a duenna. At Madame Cambry's she performed the functions of housekeeper, and acquitted herself of them in a perfect manner. The garden, the table, the stable, were all under her intelligent control, and she exercised her authority so quietly that outside of the household and the tradespeople she was hardly known to exist. Passionately attached to Madame Cambry, a trusty confidante, she contented herself with the position she had occupied for so many years, and kept herself systematically out of the way. M. Roger Darcy had perhaps seen her two or three times; he had never spoken to her.

Since Madame Cambry had decided to marry again, she had made no change in her regular habits, and her existence was almost the same as before. She seldom went out in the day time, and still less in the evening. A few necessary visits, sometimes an excursion to the Sorbonne to listen to some professor in vogue; to the Bois de Boulogne, along the drives the least frequented by young ladies of fashion; and now and then, an appearance in society or at the theatre. On the other hand, she received freely. Her Saturday reunions lasted till the end of spring, and her friends were certain to find her at home, from four till six, every day, or nearly so. The mornings had their employment. Madame Cambry devoted them to the cares of her household and to the poor. She freely gave alms; and Dame Jacinthe, having also the department of charity included in her province, had a long conference with her mistress every morning. On the day after the performance of "Mithridates," which the widow had witnessed to please M. Darcy, who was an enthusiastic admirer of Racine, the conference was held at the end of the garden, in a greenhouse filled with rare plants. During the winter, whenever the sun deigned to show itself, Madame Cambry liked to go and sit there, and on that day, for a wonder, the solar planet cast some rather pale rays upon the first buds of the precocious chestnut trees. Standing before her mistress, the housekeeper, dressed in black, read aloud the items entered on her book of expenditures; and her mistress, who listened to her absent-mindedly, soon interrupted her to ask if the footman had returned. She had sent him with a letter for Berthe Lestérel, and awaited the reply impatiently. "He has just returned, madame," replied Dame Jacinthe. "He did not find the person at home but he left the letter."

"Monsieur Darcy has sent nothing?" asked Madame Cambry.

"No, madame. But it is only noon. He must still be at the Palais."

"That's true. I had forgotten what he told me yesterday at the theatre. I shall, no doubt, see him this afternoon."

"Then madame will not go out?"

"Later, perhaps. But I am anxious not to miss Monsieur Darcy's visit, and, just now, I don't feel well. The performance fatigued me horribly."

"Madame must greatly need repose."

"And I can take none. Isn't it necessary that I should occupy myself with my marriage? Monsieur Darcy wishes the wedding to take place immediately after Lent—that is to say, in the latter part of April. I have scarcely time to prepare myself," said the widow, with a smile.

"Ah! it will be a great change in madame's life," sighed the house-keeper.

"I know it. Do you think, then, that I decided without reflection? I shall lose my liberty, but I am resigned to it. It was necessary. And you will oblige me by not speaking any more of the disadvantages, which I realise as well as you. What use is it to regret the past? My resolution is taken. It will be carried out, and I do not mean to be teased until all is over. I wish neither recriminations nor receptions. Have you sent the letters giving notice that in future I shall no longer be at home on Saturday evenings?"

"Yes, madame."

"Very well. To all who present themselves, till further orders, you will say that I am indisposed."

At this moment, round a turning in the walk, a footman appeared, carrying a visiting card, and the visitor must have told him that he was in great haste, for the servant had not taken the time to supply himself with the silver salver which is used for presenting cards and letters in a well-appointed household.

Dame Jacinthe reprimanded the man with a severe look, took the card from his hand, and read aloud the name of Henri Nointel. She expected to hear her mistress reply that she could not be seen; but Madame Cambry, after hesitating a little, said to the footman: "Tell Monsieur Nointel that I am in the garden, and conduct him here."

"I thought madame did not wish to receive any one?" said the house-keeper, as soon as the servant had turned on his heels.

"Monsieur Nointel is a friend of Monsieur Gaston Darcy. He has occupied himself a great deal about Berthe's affair. He is still engaged with it. And if he comes here so early, it is because he has something important to inform me of. It will be as well for me to see him."

"Madame will not forget that Monsieur Gaston Darcy has not always acted with desirable prudence, and that——"

"His friend doesn't resemble him. Leave us, and warn Jean that I shall go out at two o'clock. Let him have the calash ready. If the weather does not change for the worse, I shall go to the Bois de Boulogne."

Dame Jacinthe did not think it advisable to make any further observation, but went her way by a winding path. The garden was sufficiently large for one to pass through it without meeting anybody one wished to avoid. "Gaston's friend!" murmured Madame Cambry; "I saw him last evening at the Français; he afterwards saw Monsieur Darcy, who, when he returned to the box, did not seem to me to attach much importance to the interview he had had with him. Something must have happened since yesterday."

Madame Cambry was not mistaken. Nointel had not decided on risking so early a visit without a motive. But he had not only a motive, but an excellent pretext for thus ignoring the customs of good society. The pretext was the desire to be agreeable to Mademoiselle Lestrel's protectress, by informing her that her young friend had been doubly justified by her dying sister's confession. Nointel knew very well that

Gaston, or Berthe herself, might have forestalled him, and that the news he brought would perhaps be known already; but he also thought that in Madame Cambry's eyes he would at least have the merit of displaying zeal. And he had all the more reason to gain Madame Cambry's good will, since the principal object of this early visit was to ask the generous widow to come to Madame de Barancos' aid. At the theatre, on the night before, he had lacked the time for referring to this delicate subject, and but little now remained to him, as the marchioness was to see the magistrate during the day. He had himself gone to see M. Roger Darcy that morning, but had not been received; and he supposed, with some reason, that the magistrate, changing his opinion, wished to question Madame de Barancos before again seeing the man who had constituted himself her defender. The indefatigable captain found Madame Cambry prepared to listen to him. She had given a glance at her toilet and her hair in one of the glasses which adorned the greenhouse, and she looked charming with her blonde locks, a little in disorder, and her fair complexion, to which the fresh air had imparted a rosy tint. When a woman looks well, she is generally disposed to give men a good reception; and Nointel, who knew that, was delighted to arrive at a fortunate time. He commenced with the necessary apologies, and presented them in such a way as to slip in a few compliments which could not displease; but Madame Cambry was anxious to come to the point, and so she asked him if, after leaving the theatre, he had met his friend Gaston at the club.

"I left him at a very late hour," replied the captain; "I left him at the door of the house in which Monsieur Crozon resides. You are no doubt aware, madame, of what took place last night?"

"I know that Berthe was abruptly summoned to her sister's last evening, Madame Crozon having been taken with a most violent nervous attack. I sent to the Rue de Ponthieu this morning for news, but Berthe had not yet returned."

"Her sister died in her arms two hours ago. The husband, who is an old comrade of mine, wrote to me immediately."

"Died! that woman is dead!" exclaimed Madame Cambry, whose face had changed at this news. She was very pale, but did not appear to be much grieved; and Nointel was slightly shocked by the crude words which she had made use of in expressing her astonishment. "Died, carrying with her the secret of her fault! Died without justifying my poor Berthe!" continued the widow, as if to explain the harshness of her first exclamation.

"She has, on the contrary, fully justified her," said the captain. "She was anxious to make a public confession. Crozon, at her request, sent for us—Darcy and I. In our presence, before her husband and sister, she acknowledged that she had been the mistress of that Pole, who afterwards hanged himself at Julia d'Orceval's."

"She dared to name him!" muttered Madame Cambry, so disturbed that she could scarcely talk.

"She dared much more. She acknowledged that the child was hers—that child which Mademoiselle Lestérel had so generously claimed. Gaston was there. He no longer has any doubts, and his uncle can have no more, for the dying woman swore, on her eternal salvation, that Mademoiselle Lestérel had passed the greater part of the night of the ball in accompanying the nurse, who was changing her residence. One does not lie when one is about to appear before God. We were three to listen

to those last words, and Monsieur Darcy will believe us when we repeat them to him. We will take an oath, if he exacts it. It would be a little hard for Crozon, but I think I could obtain this last sacrifice from him, for he is a worthy man."

While Nointel was speaking, Madame Cambry had recovered from her emotion, and she now said in a calmer tone: "This end is horrible. The unfortunate woman has cruelly expiated her fault; but, God be praised, no one will dare to raise a voice against Berthe. She will marry the man she loves, and I shall expect Monsieur Roger Darcy to treat her henceforth as though she were already his niece. I will go and see him without losing an instant."

"He must be at the Palais just now."

"It matters little to me. I will inform him that I am there, and——"

"Will you excuse me, madame, for interrupting you, and asking you if Monsieur Darcy did not speak to you yesterday evening of the conversation I had had with him?"

"He said very little to me about it. I will not hide from you, however, that he appeared to me but little satisfied with certain things you had informed him off."

"He reproached me, I suppose, for having meddled with the investigation."

"That is about it."

"He was right, on principle. But I venture to hope, madame, that you will be more indulgent when you know that I acted in Mademoiselle Lestérel's interest. I seconded Gaston, whom his uncle had almost authorised to undertake a counter-investigation in view of proving Mademoiselle Lestérel's innocence. If I venture to address myself to-day to you, it is because you have done so much for the young girl."

"You have done right, sir, to rely upon me. What can I do for you?"

"Help me to defend another innocent woman."

"Another woman is then accused?"

"She may be accused. She is probably in Monsieur Darcy's office at the present time."

"Who is she, then?"

"The Marchioness de Barancos."

"The Marchioness de Barancos?" exclaimed Madame Cambry, with extraordinary violence. "It was true, then! She also had been the mistress of——"

"You have guessed rightly, madame. She also had had Golymine for a lover; she also had committed the imprudence of writing to him."

"How do you know this?"

"She owned it to me; and to-day she will make the avowal to the examining magistrate. But allow me to finish. Her letters fell into the hands of the D'Orceival at the same time as those of Madame Crozon and of a third victim of this adventurer."

"A third victim! What do you mean?"

"Julia d'Orceival had given appointments to three women in her box, and the three persons went to the rendezvous—Mademoiselle Lestérel, to recover her sister's letters; the two others to recover their own. That is now proved. Mademoiselle Lestérel went first, and remained but a few minutes; an unknown woman came next, and finally the marchioness."

"But then—the marchioness would be guilty—the murder could only have been committed by the woman who went last."

"That is true. But just as Madame de Barancos left the box, the woman who had preceded her returned to it."

"Who told you that?"

"Madame de Barancos herself."

"What! the woman who went out—it was the marchioness. How could Madame de Barancos dare to admit that she entered Julia d'Orcival's box?" continued the widow. "She wishes to ruin herself, then?"

"She acknowledges a fault so as to justify herself of having committed a crime," replied Nointel. "She anticipates an accusation which would certainly have been brought against her; and she does right, for she can prove that the accusation is false."

"She is rather late in confessing," said the widow, with some bitterness.

"She is a woman. It cost her something to admit a weakness for which she blushes. This man Golymine was a scoundrel of the worst sort."

"All the same she loved him?"

"Yes, she loved him! She is a creole! You will not judge her, I am sure, as you would judge a Parisian lady. And you will think, like me, that there is something grand in her boldly acknowledging that she loved him."

"Did you not just tell me that she was forced to do so?"

"No; it depended only on her to keep silence. I was almost the only one to suspect her."

"If you suspected her, you would have ended by accusing her."

"That is probable, for I had undertaken to prove that Mademoiselle Lestrel was innocent. But if I had accused her, I or any one else, she merely had to deny it. There was nothing against her, and in her favour there was her name, her position in society, her past."

"Her past! you have just told me yourself that she had had an intrigue——"

"Everybody was ignorant of it. And no one would have believed that the Marchioness de Barancos had stabbed a woman whom she scarcely knew by sight."

"But, finally, on what indication did you base your suspicions?"

"On a very slight one. I had recognised her at the ball at the opera house."

"And you had said nothing about it?"

"I had spoken of it to Gaston Darey. And it was in agreement with him that I began an investigation."

"Madame de Barancos must have perceived that you were watching her. How did it happen that she chose you for her confidant?"

"Because circumstances led to an explanation between us."

"Circumstances?"

"Yes, I went to shoot at her château at Sandouville. I arrived there with the idea of vanquishing her, and to succeed in this I profited by a moment when I found myself alone with her—I tried an experiment which turned to my confusion."

"And if it had turned out otherwise, you would have delivered the marchioness over to justice?"

"No. I should have exacted a written avowal from her, but I should have given her time to leave France."

The questions which Madame Cambry addressed to Nointel followed

each other with extraordinary rapidity. They left her lips like keen darts, and she manifested no good feeling whatever towards the marchioness. The captain's answers were clear, but he put less vivacity into them. He even hesitated at times, for he felt an embarrassment, the cause of which he was unable to explain to himself. It seemed to him that the ground on which he walked was giving way under him, and so he advanced timidly, fearing to fall into some precipice. The scene took place along a walk bordered with large trees, a walk which they paced side by side, for the dialogue had commenced so quickly, and had become so interesting, that Madame Cambry had not thought of asking Nointel to enter the greenhouse, and, without thinking of it, they had commenced to walk while chatting.

"Really," said Madame Cambry, stopping suddenly, "I do not know why I ask you all this. You have a perfect right to act as you think best in this strange affair. Forgive my indiscretion."

"I have nothing to forgive you, madame," replied the captain, more and more surprised at the turn taken by the conversation. "I came here to make a confession; and even if you had asked nothing of me, I should have told you all."

"With what object, pray?"

"To try and obtain your support with Monsieur Darcy. Madame de Barancos is not guilty, but she needs to be defended. Neither was Mademoiselle Lestérel guilty, but if you had not defended her, God knows what would have happened."

"It seems to me that you defend the marchioness warmly enough, and that you can do without my assistance. What could I say in her favour? I was ignorant of all you have been pleased to inform me of, and have no reason for interesting myself in her. I went to her ball to oblige Monsieur Darcy, who wished to show himself there with me; but, to tell the truth, I do not know her."

"I am aware of it, madame; but Monsieur Darcy will talk to you about her."

"Why? Monsieur Darcy is not in the habit of consulting me on the affairs he investigates."

"That of Madame de Barancos is connected with that of Mademoiselle Lestérel. It is quite natural that he should converse with you on a matter which so closely affects a person whom you love, and whom his nephew is going to marry. Mademoiselle Lestérel is, even now, certainly out of the case; but so that she may be fully justified, that public opinion may confirm the judge's decision, it is necessary that the woman who killed Julia d'Orceval should be found. And Madame de Barancos' deposition will put Monsieur Darcy on the track. What would you not give so that this abominable creature might be discovered?"

"I! You are mistaken. I pleaded the cause of Berthe, who was my friend, and that cause I have gained. I have done my duty, but my duty stops there. What interest have I in the marchioness, and this unknown woman who perhaps has never existed? I am not charged with enlightening justice. It is its business to search for criminals, and I don't see why I should make myself its auxiliary. I am not at all anxious to send a wretched woman to the scaffold, a woman whose blood will not redeem that which she shed—and who, perhaps, repents. Indeed, if I knew her, I would not denounce her. You can't understand why I think thus? That is because you men are pitiless."

"Might I venture to observe to you that you have very little pity for the marchioness?" said the captain, softly.

"Might I venture to ask you why she inspires you with so much?" retorted the widow, looking Nointel in the face.

He reflected a moment, but he preferred to be frank. "Because I love her," he replied, without lowering his eyes.

"You love her?" said Madame Cambry, starting. "Berthe also is loved. What have they done that they are thus loved?" Then, straightening herself up: "You finish where you ought to have commenced," she said, compelling herself to smile. "It is my vocation to protect those who love. You are in love. I am wholly at your service."

"What! you will consent to speak for Madame de Barancos?"

"Yes, if you furnish me with the elements of defence. I will willingly be her advocate—if the magistrate consents to listen to me; but I have still to know what arguments I can make use of."

"Oh! it is not a piece of pleading that I solicit of your generosity. That would be exacting too much; and, besides, I hope that it will not be necessary to go so far. This is what I beg of you to do: you know that Monsieur Darcy is to hear Madame de Barancos to-day?"

"You have just informed me of it. Monsieur Darcy, after chatting with you yesterday at the theatre, told me that he would probably be obliged to spend part of the day at the Palais hearing some witnesses, but he did not speak to me of the marchioness."

"It is she he is to receive at the Palais. I shouldn't be astonished if he had also summoned Mademoiselle Lestérel, but he has no doubt been informed of the misfortune which has befallen her, and will content himself with hearing Madame Majoré."

"Who is this Madame Majoré?"

"Madame Majoré is the box-opener who had charge of Julia d'Orcival's box."

"I can't divine what information she could give Monsieur Darcy, who has already questioned her, and could draw nothing from her."

"That is, because she is stupid, in the first place; and next, because she has taken it into her head to keep to herself an important discovery she had made."

"A discovery?" asked Madame Cambry, frowning.

"Yes; I knew how to make her talk, and even induced her to confide to me an object which she picked up out of the blood of that poor woman d'Orcival."

"What object?"

"Oh! a very insignificant one. A gold sleeve-button of somewhat peculiar form—a button which evidently belonged to the woman who struck the blow with Mademoiselle Lestérel's poniard."

"Ah! you believe that this ornament—belongs to ~~her~~—"

"There can be no doubt of it. Julia wore no cuffs with her domino. And it is clear that she tore off the button while trying to seize the hand which was raised over her. Besides, this button bears an initial, engraved in relief, which is not that of either of Julia d'Orcival's two names."

"Then, this initial is neither a J nor an O?"

"It is a B."

"But tell me," said Madame Cambry, with a little hesitation, "was not Julia d'Orcival's real name Julie Berthier?"

"Yes; but she disowned her father's name, and she would not have had any jewellery calculated to remind her of it."

"That's possible—only it seems to me that this letter is very vague. There are thousands of surnames which commence with a B—and hundreds of Christian names—nine, for instance.

"Yours, madame?" asked Nointel, surprised and somewhat confused.

"I admit, to my shame, that I do not know it."

"My name is Barbe."

"And the marchioness's husband's name was Barancos. The world is full of these chances, which seem to present themselves expressly to mislead investigations. Isn't Mademoiselle Lestrel's name Berthe? And so Monsieur Darcy won't, I suppose, attach great importance to so common an initial, so numerous used. And these strange coincidences will end, I hope, in convincing him that appearances are often deceptive, and that the most positive evidence has sometimes no value. I could quote him a very recent proof of the truths I advance, but I shall be very careful not to do so; for, should I quote it to him, I should be obliged to speak of you, madame."

"Of me?"

"Yes, it is a matter which it is as well for you to know, and I beg of you to permit me to inform you of it."

"I shall be delighted to hear it," said Madame Cambry, showing some little emotion.

"I went to Julia d'Orcival's funeral out of curiosity, for I was not one of her friends. At the church, which overflowed with people, I noticed by chance a woman who was kneeling in the darkest corner of the nave, and veiled so closely that it was impossible to see her face. I don't know why it was, but it occurred to my mind that this woman must be the one who had killed Julia, and that she had been attracted there by her remorse."

"What an idea!" murmured the widow.

"At that time I was beginning to suspect Madame de Barancos, and I at once imagined it was she. I even made preparations to follow her after the service, but she disappeared in the crowd, and escaped me without my being able to find her again. However, this incident induced me to make inquiries; I went as far as the cemetery and took Julia's maid with me in a cab. That girl informed me of something very strange."

"What was that?"

"The funeral expenses were paid by one of Julia's friends, a young woman who for this purpose drew ten thousand francs from a Russian she is acquainted with; but the grant of land at Père Lachaise was paid for by a person whose name, as inscribed on the register of burials, is certainly a pseudonym. I always had the marchioness in my head. The sum was considerable, and could only have been given by a rich woman. And this sum had been paid in by a kind of duenna. All this corresponded perfectly with Madame de Barancos."

"Why—yes—and until the contrary is proved, one must believe—"

"I have just obtained the proof to the contrary. The damsel I just mentioned wrote to me yesterday to beg me to call upon her. Urged on by I don't know what presentiment, I went to see her and learned from her lips that, two days previously, having gone to Père Lachaise to visit her friend's tomb, she had met a woman praying and weeping beside the grave."

"Well?" asked Madame Cambry, coldly.

"I already knew yesterday that Madame de Barancos was not guilty, and, nevertheless, I almost feared to hear this damsel tell me that she had recognised her from having often met her in the Bois. Fortunately, the weeper does not resemble the marchioness at all. She is fair, and hasn't the slightest foreign accent."

"This creature spoke to her, then?"

"Yes, and the lady ran off as fast as she could. Another proof that it was she who had killed Julia. The young woman had never seen her before, but she fully expected to see her again one day or other, and I made her promise to follow her should the opportunity present itself."

"It won't present itself—at least, it is hardly probable."

"I am of your opinion, madame. The remorseful lady will take her precautions. But you would never divine what happened. The damsel I mentioned found herself last evening at the Théâtre Français with her Russian. She saw me, she called me and pointed out to me, as the woman who had gone to kneel at Julia's grave, a person whom I should no doubt have caused to be arrested at once if she had not been known to me."

"What!—I—I don't understand."

"I readily believe it, for what remains to me to tell you is prodigious. Claudine—this creature is named Claudine—Claudine claimed that the weeper—was you, madame—you whom I had just left. You may well believe that I laughed in the face of the silly woman who made this gross mistake. But you will also grant that the most respectable woman may be the victim of an error, so that judicial mistakes must be frequent."

This narrative was assuredly of a nature to move Madame Cambry. She became pale, and scarcely had the strength to murmur: "What! that wretched creature dared—you are right—no one is safe from calumny."

"Oh!" exclaimed Nointel, "the matter isn't worthy of notice, and, for my part, I attached no importance to it. I only quoted it to you as an example of the unreliability of evidence."

"But—you were obliged to answer——"

"That didn't trouble me in the least: I said to Claudine that she had not shown any common sense, and begged her to let me alone. She wished to insist, and to maintain that she had not been mistaken. But I turned my back on her, and went away laughing at her foolishness—laughing sadly, for I said to myself that this wild creature might meet you elsewhere and relate this story to others."

"It would not be believed," said Madame Cambry, who had recovered from her surprise. "Your young lady must really be mad. I regret that you didn't come and repeat to me what she had just told you, and point out to me the impertinent creature who confounds me with some friend of Madame d'Orceival."

"I could not do so. Monsieur Darcy had just gone to join you, and I should have feared wounding him. But you must have perceived Claudine during the performance. She was in a box not far from yours."

"A dark woman, short—in a light dress, with large brilliants in her ears."

"Exactly. She was with a foreigner who has precisely the appearance of a footman of a stylish household."

"That's it. I remember now having noticed her, on account of her dress, which was but little appropriate. Her name is Claudine, you say?"

"Claudine Rissler, and she lives in the Rue de Lisbonne. She is a

person who shows herself a great deal. She is to be met in the Bois, in the Champs-Élysées, at the theatres——”

“In many places where I but seldom go. However——”

Madame Cambry stopped short. A footman had just made his appearance at the turn in the walk. “What is it?” she asked, impatiently.

“Monsieur Roger Darcy has just come, and wishes to know if madame is willing to receive him.”

“Certainly. Tell him that I am in the garden.

“The coachman would like to know if madame wishes the two sorrels to be harnessed,” continued the servant, “or the black horse and grey mare.”

“I wish him to harness neither. I shall not go out.” And the widow continued, addressing herself to Nointel: “Monsieur Darcy will inform us of what you are so desirous of knowing. Rely upon me to serve you, if the occasion presents itself.” She was now quite at her ease. No more nervous movements, no more flashings of the eyes. Her speech was calm and her manner natural. One would have sworn that she had been conversing on indifferent matters.

The captain appeared more moved than she, and he was so in fact, for he asked himself with some anxiety what news the magistrate brought. Had he heard Madame de Barancos? And what turn had the examination taken? M. Roger Darcy did not delay his appearance. He displayed some surprise on seeing Nointel, but gave no sign of displeasure; he even bowed to him with much politeness, after kissing Madame Cambry's hand. This opening was a good augury.

“Monsieur Nointel has just informed me of the death of Berthe's sister,” commenced the widow.

“I also was informed of it early this morning,” said the magistrate. “Gaston came to apprise me of this sad ending of a sad story. He did well to make haste, for I was called to the Palais as early as nine o'clock for an affair connected with Mademoiselle Lestérel's case.”

“The order of discharge has been issued, has it not?”

“I have just signed it, dear madame. I should have liked to have informed Mademoiselle Lestérel in person of the decision I have arrived at with a perfect knowledge of the case, and to have told her of all the esteem I entertain for her. But she was detained at Madame Crozon's death-bed, so I have charged my nephew with seeing her.”

“Have you authorised him to inform Berthe that you will not disapprove of their marriage?”

“Why should I disapprove of it? Don't you wish it with all your heart?” said the magistrate, smiling.

“My friend, you make me very happy. Thus, you have no more doubts as to that dear girl. So all is made clear, and there will be no more question of this horrible affair—it is finished.”

“It has, on the contrary, scarcely commenced, or, at least, it has just entered upon a new phase. That is precisely what I came to inform you of, and I am very glad to have met Monsieur Nointel here, for he has taken a very active part in bringing about this transformation, and I can give him the assurance that all has passed off as well as he could have hoped.”

“I do not know how to express my gratitude to you, sir,” said the captain, much moved by this simple and dignified language.

“You owe me no gratitude. I have judged according to my conscience,

and I have acquired the certainty that Madame de Barancos has told the truth on all points."

"You have seen her then."

"Yes. She entered my office at nine o'clock this morning. She has just left it; and the box-opener of box 27, the woman Majoré whom I had summoned, went off at the same time. But, first of all, pray tell me if you have acquainted Madame Cambry with the new position of affairs?"

"In a general sense, yes," replied Nointel. "I have repeated to her what I told you last night."

"Very well, then. Madame de Barancos commenced by clearly indicating the situation in which she had been placed by a fault she bitterly regretted. I had, I admit, prejudices against her, but these prejudices are dispelled. Then she explained to me what she did and what she saw at the ball at the opera house. Finally, she offered to present herself to the box-opener—to present herself in a domino, and veiled as she was at the ball. I accepted the proposal. I had previously had the woman Majoré shut up in a room adjoining my office. The marchioness went and dressed and masked herself in the unoccupied office of one of my colleagues. Meanwhile the woman Majoré was brought in. I commenced by scolding her gently. I did not wish to frighten her, for fear she might lose her head. Then I induced her little by little to relate to me the incidents of the night of the ball. And her memory returned progressively. It needed great patience on my part, but finally I succeeded in disentangling the truth from amid a chaos of useless words. I was able to establish, with certainty, that she had successively admitted three women, she even said four, you will divine why; the first muffled up in a hired domino and wearing a velvet mask; the other two, much better attired, and wearing, according to the present style, a lace veil. Finally, she brought herself to declare that the third did not appear to her as being of the same height as the last, that there were certain differences between them—differences which she could not very well describe, but which she would be able to point out on being shown the two women. This was not in my power, as one of the two was wanting. But I informed her of the test, and I plainly saw that she was expecting it."

"Yes," said Nointel, "I had entered the opera house before going to the Théâtre Français; I met her in the slips; there was an examination of the ballet, to which her two daughters belong."

"And you warned her. That was at least useless; but matters passed off as well as could be wished, all the same. The door of a cupboard, in which my secretary hangs his coat and hat, represented the door of box 27. A stool, on which he stands to reach his files when they are placed too high for him to get at them otherwise, served as a seat for Madame Majoré, who at once took her position upon it, closing her eyes. I thought for a moment that she slept, but I found out that it was her way of meditating. I then gave the order, in a loud voice, to bring in one of the dominoes—I wished the box-opener to think that both dominoes were there—and Madame de Barancos entered." It may well be believed that Madame Cambry and Nointel listened with feverish attention, Madame Cambry especially, for she was not, like the captain, informed of the scene arranged for discovering the truth. "Never did my clerk witness so enjoyable a sight," continued M. Darcy. "Madame de Barancos, in her domino, had the bearing of a queen, and I at once felt

that it would be impossible, even for a stupid box-opener, to confound her with another woman. She went straight to Madame Majoré—who rose at once as though she had been shot up by a spring—and said to her deliberately, touching the door of the closet with her gloved forefinger: ‘Will you please open this box for me?’ And as Madame Majoré, stupefied, did not answer her, she, supposing the reply, continued in an imperious manner: ‘Then you won’t open it for me? Very well. I shall go away and not return; warn the lady of that.’ It was then alone that I noticed the slight accent which at times betrays the marchioness’s nationality. She only has this accent when excited or irritated.”

“Yes, I have noticed the same thing. It is an intermittent accent.”

“But quite marked, nevertheless, for the box-opener recognised her at once, and the situation was so well reproduced, that the narrow-brained creature replied exactly as she had replied on the night of the ball: ‘But, madame, since I tell you I have orders only to let one person enter at a time. And see! it isn’t worth while for you to get angry. Here’s the other one going away.’”

“My mind was already pretty well made up, for, before seeing Madame Majoré, the marchioness had quoted to me word for word the reply she had obtained from her at the opera-house. But from that moment light broke in with prodigious rapidity. Madame Majoré recalled everything; the departure of the woman who had the accent, the return of the other one who had already been once received, and who had been waiting in the corridor. She described the smallest details of the two scenes. It had sufficed to touch a spring to set all the machinery of her disordered memory in motion once more. Balaam’s ass spoke. I was tempted to proclaim a miracle. Finally, she took an oath, holding up both hands, and using odd terms, in which I thought I could recognise masonic formulas; she swore that it was materially impossible that the person who was before her eyes could have assassinated Julia d’Orcival, as Julia d’Orcival still lived when that person left the box not to set foot in it again. I was fully persuaded of this. I had the examination recorded—it will be carefully preserved as a curiosity, that I will answer for—it will be shown later on to the young magistrates who peruse the archives.”

“And Madame de Barancos?” interrupted Nointel, carried away by his emotion.

“Madame de Barancos is perfectly innocent. She will only figure in the records of this singular sitting in the character of a witness. Her private conduct does not concern me, and I shall have nothing more to do with her until I present to her the culprit, whom I shall also have dressed up in a domino, so that the marchioness and the box-opener may be able to recognise her.”

“The culprit! You still hope to find her, then?” asked Madame Cambry, with a touch of irony.

“It won’t be very easy, but I shall succeed. I don’t know if Monsieur Nointel has informed you that he has handed me, somewhat late, it is true, a piece of jewellery that was picked up in the box.”

“Yes, a piece of jewellery which bears the initial letter of my baptismal name.”

“My dear Barbe,” said M. Darcy, laughing, “you are not accused, and Sainte Barbe, your patroness, and the patroness of the artillery service, is a great saint. I rely on giving a dinner on your fête-day, the 4th of next December. We will invite Monsieur Nointel, although he has never

served in the artillery corps. "Now, to talk more seriously, I can inform you that the investigation has already commenced. The jewellers will be questioned, principally those who have been long in business, for the button is an old one. And it must belong to a woman who is rich, elegant, and intelligent, for it has an artistic value. Would you believe that for a moment I imagined that I had seen this article of jewellery in society? This is what it is to pass one's life growing pale over judicial problems—one ends by having outlandish dreams. But no matter; I shall have to show it to your housekeeper some day. She knows everything, and she is of an age to remember the jewellers who were in vogue in the days of King Louis Philippe."

The examining magistrate's gaiety did not enliven the good-looking widow; but Nointel—who was swimming in joy and dying with the desire to go and see the marchioness—Nointel thought that the time had come to allow the magistrate to enjoy a private conversation with his future wife. So he took his leave, after warmly thanking M. Darcy, who made him promise to come and see him, and Madame Cambry did not at all try to detain him.

VIII.

ON leaving Madame Cambry's residence, Nointel felt so happy that he did not touch the ground, as is vulgarly said. He reached the foot of the Arc de Triomphe without having perceived how far he had gone, and the sight of the monument did not calm his elation. He was taken with something like a desire to pass under it, to celebrate the victories he had gained; and, in truth, he might well be proud of having saved two innocent women. Medals are awarded to men who have done much less.

In the midst of the captain's enthusiasm, a thought which came like a damper occurred to him. As M. Roger Darcy had not mentioned Simancas' name to him, he concluded that the marchioness had not spoken of her relations with the pretended Peruvian general. It was somewhat natural that she should pass over that deplorable story in silence; but it was, unfortunately, probable that Simancas and Saint-Galmier would not imitate her discretion. The two rascals had every interest in provoking a scandal, since they no longer had anything to expect from Madame de Barancos, who had driven them away. Now that the brigand, whom the marchioness had shot at Sandouville, was dead, how could he, Nointel, convict them of having organised and superintended nocturnal attacks in the streets? Where could he find the other bandits whom they must have had in their pay, since they did not operate themselves? The marchioness, it is true, could laugh at their denunciations, so far as the opera house affair was concerned, but she was not safe from their interested backbiting. Nothing prevented them from circulating the story that she had been Golymine's mistress. Simancas resorted to anonymous letters, as brave men resort to the sword. He was quite capable of using the former weapon to ruin Madame de Barancos' reputation.

And this was not the only danger she ran. Simancas might accuse her of having murdered that scamp at the *battue*, and it was even probable that he would take advantage of the circumstance to recommence his attempts at blackmail.

"It is absolutely necessary that I should reduce this blackguard to

silence," said Nointel to himself. "Madame Baranco told me that she would relate the story of those three gunshots to the magistrate. It seems to me that she said nothing about it, and, in my own opinion, she ~~is~~ right. She would have uselessly complicated the situation, and I don't know exactly how Monsieur Darcy would have taken the affair. Although one may be legitimately acting in self-defence, one always puts one's-self in a bad position by breaking a man's skull. I will advise the marchioness to persist in her new resolve, and keep silent. And I will take care of the Peruvian. Crozon will rid me of him, in one way or another. If the general consents to fight—which I very much doubt—Crozon will kill him. If he refuses, Crozon will pursue him so vigorously, that he will force him to leave France. Saint-Galmier still remains. But I will go and say a couple of words to him, which will give him a severer nervous attack than all those he pretends to cure. I will threaten him to inform a commissary of police about his alcoholised patient, and to call as a witness his negro servant, who heard the scoundrel talk of a voyage to Nouméa in company with the doctor. Only it is urgent that I should confer with these two vagabonds, who must now have returned from Sandouville. I should do as well to see them before going to visit the marchioness."

The captain thus talked to himself while descending the Avenue des Champs-Élysées on foot. It was two o'clock, and there was little chance at that hour of finding either Simancas or Saint-Galmier at their dwellings. The latter's consultations commenced much later, and Simancas was in the habit of breakfasting at about half-past twelve at the Café de la Paix, and thence going to the club to take his siesta. Nointel resolved to commence with Simancas. He accordingly hailed a cab, and twenty minutes later alighted at the corner of the Place de l'Opéra and the Boulevard des Capucines. He had no need to enter the Café de la Paix, for, on setting foot on the ground, he perceived the back of Simancas, who was crossing the Place, and who had just stopped on one of the circular places of refuge, to allow an omnibus to pass by. Nointel joined him in three strides, and slapped him on the shoulder, saying to him: "Since I meet you, I arrest you."

Simancas gave a prodigious start, and, on turning round, showed the captain a troubled face. He had his reasons for experiencing a disagreeable sensation when spoken to in that sort of way, and he, no doubt, disliked to have a hand laid so near his collar, for he exclaimed, in an angry tone: "You have a strange way of approaching people, sir."

"It is my way," replied Nointel, quietly. "I sha'n't change it. I have something to say to you. Will you go to the club with me?"

"It is impossible just now. I have some business to attend to."

"Very well; we can chat while walking. In what direction are you going?"

"In that," replied Simancas, extending his hand in the direction of the Boulevard des Italiens; "and I am in a great hurry."

"Not I. I will accompany you."

"Excuse me; but I am going to take a cab."

"Good! I will get into it with you. I repeat that I have something to say to you at once. Don't try to steal away. I hold you, and I am not going to let you go."

"It is persécution, then."

"Perhaps. Make up your mind. I must have my audience. Would you prefer to give it me in a cab?"

"No, after all, I prefer to walk."

"So be it! I have good legs, although I served in the cavalry. I will follow you, if necessary, as far as the Bastille."

"I am not going so far. I am going near by. So, since you absolutely insist on speaking with me, I beg of you to tell me in a few words what you have to say."

"You must suspect what it is. But let us, in the first place, cross over from this place of refuge. I will commence as soon as we have reached the asphalte."

Simancas made a dash, and no doubt would not have been sorry to have made away amid the passing vehicles, but he was not able to do so, and he and Nointel reached the side walk of the boulevard together.

"I am listening to you, sir," said the Peruvian, at the same time taking a rapid gait.

Nointel assumed the same pace, and said: "The marchioness gave you your dismissal, eh?"

"If it is to insult me that you follow me, sir, I give you notice that I shan't reply to you."

"I care nothing for your answers, I wish merely to inform you that Madame de Barancos has seen the examining magistrate; that she has told him of her relations with Golymine, and her visit to Madame d'Oreival at the opera house; that the box-opener has been questioned, and that it is positively proved that Madame de Barancos had left the box when the poor woman was killed. And so it will be as well for you to dismiss all thought of the two millions."

"We will see about that," grumbled Simancas, crossing the Rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin at one bound. "The marchioness did not tell the magistrate that a beater had been killed at twenty paces from her."

"No," retorted Nointel, who kept close to him. "But I propose to tell the magistrate that I recognised the beater whose sad end you no doubt deplore."

"I! I do not know him."

"You knew him so well that you had paid him to assassinate me. He isn't such a bad shot. The bullet he sent at me passed within two inches of my skull. Do you take the Rue du Helder? No, you still follow the boulevard. Oh! It is all the same to me. I was telling you that your honourable friend missed me. He was an awkward fellow. The proof of it is, that in taking his gun again to fire the second shot, he pulled the trigger and killed himself—without wishing to do so."

"I will prove that it was either the marchioness or you who killed him."

"The marchioness or I! Oh! I advise you to consider before you see the magistrate. But, dash it! how you walk! decidedly the Spaniards are the best foot-soldiers in the world. Here we are at the Rue Taibout. Do you go that way? Ah! I have it, Monsieur Darcy lives in the Rue Rougement. You are perhaps going to his residence? Well, I recommend you to take time for reflection. It is a very delicate step."

"Come, sir," said the general, "I see that you are making fun of me. He laughs best who laughs the last."

"The last to laugh, my dear sir, will be Monsieur Crozon. Monsieur Crozon, who knows that you are the author of certain anonymous letters, and who proposes to run you through with his sword after publicly slapping your face."

"You have denounced me to him?"

"Denounced is an ugly word, which can only be applied to a person like yourself. You denounced Madame Crozon to her husband; Monsieur Crozon, who is my friend, asked me if I knew the perpetrator of these infamies. I told him it was you. But take care, you are beginning to lose your breath. As for me, I am just getting my wind, and if you keep up this pace, you will soon be blown."

This promenade had, in fact, taken an extravagant pace. They no longer walked, they ran. They had already passed the Rue Le Peletier, and were not far from the Rue Drouot. Simancas could stand it no longer. He stopped short, and, taking out his watch, stammered: "I have an appointment which I cannot fail to keep, sir, and I am already late. You take advantage of my situation. It would be better for you to say what you want with me."

"What I want is, that you should leave Paris within forty-eight hours, and France within five days' notice. I will remind you that you have every interest in putting the Atlantic Ocean between yourself and Monsieur Crozon."

"Ah, sir, why did you not speak sooner? I have had enough of this country in which justice commits nothing but errors, and I leave for the United States next Saturday."

"You take Saint-Galmier with you, I hope?"

"Yes; Saint-Galmier returns to Canada."

"Very good. Then I can almost promise you that you will save your skin. Crozon has just lost his wife. You were the cause of her death, and Crozon has good reasons for wishing to rip you up. But he has other matters to trouble him for the moment. You have a few days' respite—two or three, not more—the time needed to bury Madame Crozon. Make the most of it."

"That is what I am going to do. You have said everything? Then allow me to leave you."

"I no longer detain you. Only remember that you will be watched until you have gone away, and that at the least defection of conduct——"

Simancas had already started off again, and Nointel judged it useless to pursue him. He thought he had sufficiently frightened the rascal so that the marchioness need no longer fear him. "Where the deuce is he hurrying like that?" thought the captain, still following the Peruvian with his eyes. "He must have some very important business on hand, for he hardly tried to defend himself. Ah! he is turning into the Rue Drouot. Dash it all! I am curious to see where he is going. Yes, but if I dog his steps he will soon perceive that I am at his heels, and will manoeuvre in such a way as to throw me off the track. What shall I do? My faith! I will risk the attempt. By following him at a distance, I shall perhaps not attract his attention, especially as he is very much pre-occupied. He has the gait of a man who is awaited at a fixed time, and who, not to miss his appointment, would allow nothing to stand in his way."

As Nointel hastened on, still reflecting, he soon reached the corner of the Rue Drouot. He arrived there just at the moment when Simancas, still ahead, entered the Hôtel Drouot, where nearly all the public auctions in Paris take place. "What!" muttered the captain, "it was to call on the auctioneers that he ran so fast. I wasn't aware that he was so fond of gimcracks. Can Julia's household effects be sold to-day, by chance?"

In that case all would explain itself. Simancas is just the man to suppose that she hid in the secret drawer of some piece of furniture various supplementary letters written by Golymine's victims—a pear she had kept to quench her thirst—and he is also quite capable of having formed a little plan of buying the aforesaid piece of furniture, and making use of the notes he might find in it. Now that he no longer hopes to obtain anything from the marchioness, he must meditate practicing blackmail on the unknown woman—visitor number three—she who used the knife. And if my rogue could lay his hand on her it wouldn't be a bad speculation. This woman must have a position in society, and it is probable that she would pay liberally to purchase the Peruvian's silence. But no, it can't be that—I remember that Julia's sale is fixed for the 19th of April, and that it will take place at her late residence on the Boulevard Malesherbes—the newspapers have announced it—all Paris will go there—in six weeks. But what motive attracts this rogue to the sales to-day, then? I don't suppose that he has gone to buy objects of art? and it isn't yet time, I think, for him to sell his household goods. Dash it all! I will set my mind at rest."

The captain, who had rapidly walked up the Rue Drouot, stopped for a moment to examine the bills with which the wall of the building, set aside for auction sales, was covered: "Sale, on account of departure, of handsome and rich furniture, diamonds, silverware, body and table linen, belonging to Mademoiselle X—, dramatic *artiste*." "Sale of an important collection of old pictures, belonging to Monsieur Van K—, a celebrated amateur of Rotterdam;" nothing was wanting in the collection. After glancing over all these bills, Nointel, finding himself no better informed, opened the door and entered.

The question was to find Simancas in one of the rooms of this somewhat complicated edifice, and to watch him, so as to find out what he came there for. As the more important sales, including those of artistic objects and handsome furniture, usually take place on the first floor, Nointel climbed the stairs, and entered one room after another. Business was in progress, and there were numbers of people; but, despite a diligent search, the captain saw no signs of Simancas. At length he entered the last room, where he found a picture sale going on. Few, or no women, were present, but there were several badly-dressed old men, who passed the pictures from hand to hand, rubbed them with a corner of their checked handkerchiefs, and looked at them so closely that they had the appearance of licking them. In addition there were three or four idlers, and half-a-dozen amateurs who had come for a single picture and waited impatiently for it to be placed upon the table. Nointel entered just as the auctioneer announced a picture of Dutch domestic life, attributed to Van Ostade, and set it up at thirty francs. There was a deal of laughter, but no bids. But the captain was not a little surprised when, instead of Simancas, whom he was looking for, he recognised Saint-Galmier roaming about at the end of the room. The doctor appeared to be much bored. He did not look at the frames which decorated the walls, but yawned in a way to dislocate his jaws. He changed his attitude, however, as soon as Nointel appeared. He hastened towards the table where the Dutch picture was being exhibited, and asked to look at it. The Van Ostade was at once brought to him, and he seized it with avidity, and raised it before his face in such a way as to make a screen of it. "Oh! oh!" thought Nointel, "the rogue is trying to evade me, and he perhaps imagines that I have not perceived

him. Evidently, his acolyte isn't here. . If he was, the pair of them would be together. Simancas will come by-and-by. The doctor is waiting for him, that's clear. Why does he wait instead of going to join him? Probably, because Simancas wishes to operate alone—operate at what? and where?—the deuce if I can imagine. I will continue my tour of the building until I meet him. And I will allow Saint-Galmier to believe that I didn't recognise his ugly face. He won't leave, as he has an appointment here with the other one, and, if I do not ferret out the general, I will return and stand guard over the Canadian."

Just as Saint-Galmier, to keep up appearances, made a bid of five francs on the Van Ostade, the captain went out, and quickly descended to the ground floor, where there are several narrow, badly-lighted rooms reserved for petty sales. Here stand the furniture and effects of poor people who have been unable to pay their rent or other debts. Here everything is sold—dresses and tongs, muffs and musical instruments, laces, saucepans, and pillows. Nointel had resolved to visit these rooms conscientiously, in case the general, as was improbable, had come to purchase some household utensils. Two of the rooms were open, and in the first one the sale had already commenced. An auctioneer, flanked by a scribe, announced the articles with a wearied air, and the crier called out the amounts in head-splitting tones to accelerate the operation. Second-hand clothes-dealers handled dresses and shawls with unequalled dexterity, others inspected the mattresses, while greasy-handed Auvergnats turned stewpans over and over. These people formed a compact circle around the table, and it was not easy to approach it. All sorts of things had been brought together for this sale. Even jewellery was to be found there, and Nointel espied a shabbily-dressed old Jew closely examining a ring set with brilliants. He had just paid five hundred francs for it, and yet the clothes he wore were certainly not worth more than three five-franc pieces.

This curious scene was of but little interest to the captain, and he was about to proceed with his search elsewhere, when, by dint of a close scrutiny of all the corners of the room, he discovered the Peruvian huddled up, close to the auctioneer's table, and hiding himself to the best of his ability. He had raised the collar of his overcoat, and pulled his hat down to his ears. Only his eyes and nose, hooked like a vulture's beak, could be seen. The position he had taken plainly indicated that he proposed to bid. If he had merely been there from curiosity he would have remained near the entrance to the room, instead of installing himself in a favoured position. "What has he come to buy?" Nointel asked himself. "Some object to which he attaches great importance, no doubt, for he ran just now like a hare, so as not to be too late. What object? Nothing that is being sold here came from Julia's residence. There is nothing here but the wreckage seized by some lawyers from people who are ruined." On thinking of seizures and lawyers, Golyminé occurred to him. "Indeed," he said to himself, "the count died overwhelmed with debts, and his creditors no doubt laid hands on all he left—his clothing, his jewellery, et cetera, and they are being sold by authority of the law. I have it now. Simancas wishes to procure a souvenir of his friend. He has no doubt kept himself posted up, and has learned that the last act in the proceedings is to take place to-day. Here he is; but it isn't mere sentiment that has brought him here. He cares but little for the Pole's memory. He was even delighted to learn that his dangerous accomplice

had hanged himself. However, he has a great interest in entering into possession of some of Golymine's leavings. I am going to see him work; he doesn't know that I am here. All goes well."

Meanwhile the sales succeeded each other with giddy rapidity. The objects simply disappeared. All the purchasers agreed; they had made their valuations beforehand, and were careful not to interfere with each other. The articles were knocked down after a single bid, and evil would have befallen any outsider who had taken it into his head to purchase. The "black band" would have instantly united to make him pay six times the value. So Simancas would have stubborn adversaries, unless he had been wise enough to give a commission to some broker. However, for the time being, only dresses and underclothing were being sold, and the general held himself in reserve. Nointel occupied his time with so placing himself as to be able to watch him. He found a way to insinuate himself between two fat women, who made room for him on account of his good appearance, and he installed himself close to the table, but on the opposite side to that where Simancas was hiding himself. The auctioneer's desk masked the Peruvian and prevented him from perceiving his enemy.

"Gentlemen," said the auctioneer, raising his voice to command attention, "we are about to offer a gentleman's fine wardrobe—a wardrobe consisting of clothing, arms, and jewellery." There was a deal of whispering. The assembled people evidently knew that this lot contained articles of value. "We commence with the arms," continued the auctioneer. "Here, gentlemen, you see a pair of duelling swords. Shall we say one hundred francs? Fifty francs? No! Ah! fifteen francs are bid."

"Eighteen," said an Auvergnat.

"Eighteen—we say eighteen. No one says any higher. Awarded."

The swords had been given for nothing, and Simancas had not breathed a word. Nointel had expected this, but when a box of pistols was brought he listened attentively. The box might contain a secret. Simancas remained mute, however, and the pistols were sold for a fourth of their value. A travelling dressing-case obtained no more success, and the Peruvian allowed it to be awarded without offering a copper. Nointel no longer doubted but what all this had belonged to Golymine. The dressing-case has passed under his eyes, and he had seen the initials W. G. engraved upon it beneath a count's coronet. And Simancas remained silent. Simancas, huddled up close to the platform, like a spider in the further corner of its web, did not even show the end of his nose. "He, nevertheless, came here for something," said the captain to himself. "What article is he watching for? Is the secret he wishes to appropriate hidden in the pocket of a pair of trousers, or in the lining of a waistcoat?"

"Gentlemen," cried the auctioneer, "we will now pass to the wearing apparel. A magnificent pair of Russian leather boots. Hunting boots, having been scarcely used—impervious to water. See the articles, gentlemen. Thirty francs? Twenty francs? Five francs are offered. Awarded!"

"Well," thought Nointel, "another deception. I could hardly hope that those boots contained any love letters from Golymine's mistresses, but, all the same——"

"Ah! this time, gentlemen, we have here some very valuable furs—a superb pelisse, lined throughout with otter, the collar, cuffs, and trimmings being of sable. At how much? A thousand francs?"

"There is a bid of a hundred francs," said a voice, which Nointel at once recognised.

"At last," murmured the captain, "so it is this pelisse which he wishes to buy. Golymine's pelisse, of course! Never did any but adventurers wear such overcoats. I have a vague recollection of having seen Golymine parading the Champs-Élysées in that one. But, the deuce, if I know why Simancas is anxious to possess it. If he wished to preserve a souvenir of his rascally friend, he might have bought something more portable just now. He had but to choose. The rogue does nothing without a motive, however, and has just offered a hundred francs for a well-worn garment. There is a mystery about that."

"There is a bid of a hundred francs, gentlemen," said the auctioneer, glancing at the bidder, who revealed himself all at once.

The band of brokers and dealers was already agitated. An intruder was attempting to purchase without their intervention. He must at any price be sickened of this audacious enterprise, and prevented from ever attempting it again. In such cases, some member of the corporation charges himself with bidding, and if the article is left on his hands at a price above its real value, the loss is divided. The coalition was already formed. An old Jew, who usually sold opera-glasses, took it upon himself to be its representative. "One hundred and five," said he, in a petulant voice.

"One hundred and ten," retorted Simancas, from the depths of his ambuscade.

"One hundred and fifteen."

"One hundred and twenty."

"Twenty-five."

"Thirty."

These figures succeeded each other one after the other, like the parry and thrust in a duel. "Gentlemen," said the auctioneer, who began to foresee a struggle from which the money-box of his company would benefit—"gentlemen, examine the article. This fur is magnificent—pure sable. Direct importation. The owner of the garment had just come from Russia."

"He must have dawdled on the way, then," sneered a second-hand dealer; "the lining is moth-eaten."

"Have it passed round so that these gentlemen can feel it."

The Jew made a pretext of examining the fur, and continued: "One hundred and thirty-five francs."

"One hundred and fifty," replied the Peruvian.

There was a short pause. The Jew consulted his partners with a look before going further. "Come, go on, Abraham," said a clothes-dealer, whose decisions were authoritative. "Lead that chap up to five hundred."

"Sixty," yelled the opera-glass man.

"Eighty."

"Come, gentlemen," said the auctioneer, "we won't stop there. But hurry up. We have a deal of work to get through. At one hundred and eighty francs the pelisse, which is worth at least a thousand. We say one hundred and eighty. That's for nothing."

"Two hundred," sighed Abraham, assuming the grieved air of a man who resigns himself to a sacrifice so as not to miss a good chance.

"Three hundred," growled Simancas, still invisible,

"Three hundred francs, gentlemen," proclaimed the auctioneer interrogating the Jew with his eye. "You say?—twenty-five."

"It is for you, sir," he continued, looking at the general. "Fifty; fifty has been said on my left—seventy-five over there, in front four hundred to the left." And he thus continued receiving bids of twenty-five francs, which he provoked by turning alternately towards the two bidders, who now answered only by signs. This language is perfectly understood at sale-rooms, and a deaf mute would have no trouble there. It would suffice to explain to him the figure at which the article was started. Each nod of his head would pass for a bid. Superb sets of furniture and pictures by the masters have been really knocked down to people afflicted with a nervous movement of the head, and who found that they were purchasers unknown to themselves.

Nointel looked on without taking part in the struggle, but he felt the greatest interest in it, and kept himself fully apprised of the situation. He knew the ways of the tribe of brokers, and understood that the Jew was only bidding to annoy the Peruvian, to make him pay much more for the pelisse than it was worth; and that he would let it go as soon as he judged that the lesson was severe enough to rid Simancas of all desire for another. Nointel foresaw, then, that the victory would finally remain to Simancas, who would thus enter into possession of his deceased friend's fur overcoat. And he asked himself if he should abandon it to him; he racked his brain to divine the secret of the Peruvian's strange conduct. Meanwhile, the round figure of five hundred francs fell from the auctioneer's lips in translation of the last nod given by the customer on his left. He laughed in his sleeve, did this auctioneer, and only cared to profit by this fancy which he could not explain to himself. "Gentlemen," he said, rising to give more solemnity to his words, "we have reached five hundred, and will go on to a thousand. I say a thousand francs, and this admirable garment has cost a thousand roubles. It must have belonged to a great dignitary of the Russian court." The opera-glass dealer remained unmoved. The Russian court had little effect upon him. "Or to a Polish exile who has brought it back from Siberia," continued the facetious auctioneer. "If you do not wish it, gentlemen, I will award it." Here the ivory mallet came into action. The auctioneer seized the instrument by the handle and began to brandish it, as though he proposed to use it for the purpose of breaking the head of old Abraham, who had entered into a confabulation with his neighbours instead of keeping up the sacred fire of bids. "Five hundred and twenty," suddenly cried another second-hand dealer. "I love Poland, I do. And I don't like the citizens who come and stick their noses in our affairs," he added, in a low voice.

"That is the way to talk, gentlemen. I knew that we were not going to stop on the way. Only, let's make haste. It is late. Five hundred and twenty. Nothing is said on the left?"

And the mallet began to vibrate at a few inches from the table which it threatened to strike. But Simancas was silent. He did not abandon the pelisse; but he asked himself if, instead of following up the struggle which might carry him very far indeed, he would not do better to let it be awarded and come to an understanding afterwards with the purchaser.

The face of the second-hand dealer, the friend of Poland, commenced to lengthen, for his fellows had not commissioned him to go beyond five

hundred, and he feared that the garment would be left on his hands. "That Auverpin's lucky," said a big woman, laughing. "All the good things fall to him. He must have a bit of hangman's rope in his pocket."

Of all the faculties of the mind, memory is certainly the most capricious. It takes inexplicable naps, and has unforeseen awakenings. Why should this woman's witticism suddenly recall a forgotten fact to the captain? Why should he remember all at once that, on the evening Golyminé hanged himself at Julia's residence, he wore this pelisse with the sable collar? Darcy had even related to him that Simancas, on learning of his friend's death at the club, had been anxious to know how Golyminé was dressed when he hanged himself, and that he had poorly succeeded in concealing his emotion when Lolif assured him that Golyminé had died in his fur coat. These details had so far escaped Nointel's mind. But they returned to him with singular clearness, and he at once said to himself: "All explains itself. The pelisse is crammed with secrets."

"Five hundred and twenty!" continued the auctioneer. "Five hundred and twenty francs for the thousand rouble fur coat. No one gives more? Once! Twice!"

"Five hundred and fifty," said Nointel.

The new champion's entrance into the lists created a sensation. The auctioneer knew him by sight, from having often seen him at art sales, and he addressed him a gracious smile. The dealers began to look at him with mocking curiosity, and at once came to an understanding to let the two gentlemen dispute over a garment for which none of them would have willingly given three louis. But, of all present, Simancas was the most astonished. He had little suspected that the captain was there, for, from the corner where he kept himself, he could not see him, but he recognised his clear and incisive voice; he recognised it at once, and he took a step forward, came out of his hiding-place, and showed himself, so that the two adversaries found themselves face to face. The Peruvian was pale, for he felt that he was caught. Nointel eyed him as though he would say: Go on! bid away! I am waiting for you. "Six hundred," growled Simancas.

"Seven hundred," retorted Nointel.

"Seven hundred to the right!" proclaimed the auctioneer. "The reply on the left—we are losing time, gentlemen—follow if you please."

"A thousand," articulated Golyminé's accomplice, not without an effort.

"Come, now, to the right! we are not at the end."

"That rascal is going to cost me dear," thought the captain, "but it shan't be said that I yielded to him. Twelve hundred," he added aloud.

"Twelve hundred and fifty."

"The old slowcoach," sneered the woman who had spoken of the hangman's rope. "He only puts on fifty."

"That must be his mother's pelisse," said another female dealer.

"Thirteen hundred," cried Nointel. And in an undertone: "Go on, scoundrel. The three thousand I put in my pocket this morning shall go for it. I meant to buy a horse at Tattersall's, and I shall only have a second-hand coat for the money, even if I have it."

"Does the gentleman wish to examine the furs?" asked the auctioneer, who thought that Simancas was weakening. "Pass the pelisse to the gentleman."

"To me in the first place," said Nointel, quickly. He mistrusted the

Peruvian's hands. The young crier, who for the last quarter of an hour had triumphantly promenaded about with the pelisse, came and handed it to the captain.

"Fifteen hundred," continued Simancas, at the same time.

Nointel, without hurrying himself, began feeling the collar and the lining. He knew very well that the coat would not be awarded till he had finished, and he gravely blew on the sable under which his fingers were feeling. "Sixteen," said he suddenly, raising his head. He had just recognised by the feeling that there were papers hidden under the fur.

"Sixteen hundred and fifty," replied Simancas, in a rage, for he understood very well why his adversary so carefully fingered the pelisse.

"Seventeen hundred," replied the captain. "All my savings shall go for it, if necessary," he thought, "but I will hold on to it."

"Would the gentleman on my left like to see it?" asked the auctioneer. "No? It is useless, eh! Its value is fixed upon. Then, we say?"

"Seventeen hundred and fifty."

"Eighteen," replied Nointel.

"Eighteen hundred and fifty."

Simancas defended himself step by step. At this moment he felt that he was being pulled by the sleeve, and he turned furiously upon the importunate fellow who came to disturb him at such a moment. The person in question was Saint-Galmier, and he must have had something of grave and urgent importance to say to the Peruvian, for he dragged him forcibly as far as the door of exit, and began to talk to him in a low tone. "Nineteen hundred," said the captain, without raising his voice more than was necessary. At the same time he looked at the auctioneer, who seemed quite disposed to bring the matter to a close. The ivory mallet was moving. "Let us hurry up, gentlemen. I am going to make the award. The garment has been well examined? It is well understood?"

Simancas kept silent. He was listening to the doctor, and the last bid, breathed by Nointel, had not reached his ears. He thought that they had stopped at his. "For the third and last time, gentlemen; no one adds more?" said the auctioneer. "Come now!—the word?" There was a short pause, and as the word did not come, the mallet fell with a sharp sound. "The superb pelisse is awarded—nineteen hundred francs and the expenses."

"Excuse me!" exclaimed Simancas, who suddenly returned, "eighteen hundred and fifty."

"Nineteen hundred—to that gentleman," replied the auctioneer, designating the captain.

"But not to me—there is a mistake."

"I appeal to everybody. That gentleman said the last word. Nineteen hundred."

"Yes, yes, we heard him," replied the male and female dealers in chorus.

"That adjudication is a fraud—I protest."

"I beg of you not to trouble the sale, sir. Crier, announce two bearskin travelling rugs." Then, addressing the captain, who held the pelisse in one hand and felt for his pocket book with the other: "You wish to pay and take it away? Yes? Very well. Will you please to settle with my secretary."

The captain clambered unceremoniously on to the table, jumped down on to the other side, and advanced towards the secretary, carrying his

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pelisse over his left shoulder. He had such a swaggering air, that one of the female dealers exclaimed: "The old block has found his match!"

The fact is, Simancas was fairly green, and Saint-Galmier put no better face on the matter than his acolyte. Nointel was obliged to pass very close to the two rogues in order to settle his account with the secretary, but he did not deign to look at them. He paid for the pelisse without letting go of it, and carried it away, feeling more proud than if he had taken the sword of a Prussian general. He was anxious to return home to examine his acquisition. However, in the corridor which led to the Rue Drouot he met the Peruvian, and perceived Saint-Galmier, a little further off, conferring with his servant, the negro, who wore a red and green livery. "Excuse me, sir," said Simancas to him, "I should like to speak with you for an instant, and if it pleases you to go to the club with me—"

"Thanks. I haven't the time. Explain yourself here, and be brief."

"I have a proposal to make to you, sir."

"What is it?"

"I don't know with what object you have bought this garment, which can be of no use to you."

"You think so?"

"You certainly don't intend to wear it—and neither was it for its use that I desired to have it, but I attach great value to its possession, because it belonged to an unfortunate friend."

"To Goly mine. That is precisely why I hold on to it. That Pole was a very extraordinary personage, and his relics are precious."

"You don't speak seriously, and I hope that you will consent to yield me this pelisse—at any price you please." The captain looked at Simancas with such an air that the warrior from beyond the seas lowered his eyes. "You are the most impudent rascal I have met in my life," said the captain to him, quietly. "You deserve that I should have you arrested on the spot. We should both be taken before the commissioner of police. I would send word to Monsieur Roger Darcy, the magistrate. He would come without delay and make an inventory of the papers which your worthy comrade has hidden in his overcoat."

"Papers! you are mistaken, sir. What papers?"

"That is what I shall know within half-an-hour. Meanwhile, I am willing not to break the truce I accorded you on the boulevard when you were running so fast. Go off then, but don't let me see you again, or hear talk of you. If you should have the audacity to present yourself at Madame de Barancos', I would not spare you in the least."

Simancas would have greatly liked to insist, but he saw Saint-Galmier making signals of distress to him, and so he decided, much against his will, to retire. Nointel, without further concerning himself about the matter, gained the door which opens on the Rue Drouot. There he was obliged to wait till a cab passed, for he did not care to go about with the Pole's pelisse on his arm, and for nothing in the world would he have put it on. It was not long before a cab came in sight. Nointel hailed it, and a minute later he was on his way to the Rue d'Anjou. To serve as a pastime for his impatience, he tried to think of an explanation for Simancas's last actions. "That scoundrel, driven away by the marchioness, must have thought of trying operations in another direction. He evidently knew very well that Julia d'Oreival had been killed by another of Goly mine's mistresses, a woman whose name he was ignorant of, but upon whom he would willingly have operated, now that he can no longer

profit by Madame de Barancos. He also knew that the Pole had stored important papers in his pelisse. He knew that this pelisse had been seized with all the rest of Golymine's effects, on the requisition of his numerous creditors. He knew that it would be sold by authority of justice, and had so arranged as to be informed of the day of the sale. That day coinciding with that of his return from Sandouville, he scarcely took time to go home and change his clothes before hurrying to the Rue Drouot. Saint-Galmier had gone there, but they had separated so as not to attract attention in case they met people of their acquaintance. The doctor had gone to loiter on the first floor, while the general took up his position downstairs."

But why had the doctor suddenly rejoined the general? What news had the negro brought to him? Nointel conjectured that an unforeseen occurrence obliged them to change their plans; that they felt themselves threatened by some one, and had realised the need of uniting in all haste, so as to consult together. And the captain concluded that he need no longer trouble himself about them. He hoped, moreover, that he would find weapons against them in the garment he held upon his knees. On reaching home he at once said to his valet, who looked astonished on seeing his master carrying this old coat: "Bring me a pair of scissors and leave me to myself. I am not at home to any one, excepting Monsieur Darcy."

Two minutes later, the captain, shut up in his study, spread the pelisse upon the table, turned the pockets inside out, and felt the lining carefully. This preliminary inspection convinced him that the secret, if there were one, was hidden in the collar, which he at once carefully ripped open. And his trouble was not lost. It drew out, in the first place, a somewhat soiled packet of papers, which he rapidly examined. Some of them were written in Spanish, and the captain knew that language well enough to be able to understand what they said. He read with great pleasure two extracts of sentences rendered by the tribunal of Lima, condemning a certain José Simancas to the galleys as a deserter from the Peruvian army and a highway robber. There was also a fragment of a newspaper, published at Quebec, giving an account of an action for swindling against one Cochard, called Saint-Galmier; and the penalty imposed upon the said Cochard was nine months' imprisonment. That sufficed to establish the antecedents of the two accomplices. But that was not all. Nointel also found some letters bearing the post-mark of the Paris post-office, and signed simply José—letters in which Simancas informed Count Golymine of the nocturnal habits of some of the members of his club, heavy players who returned home very late, and nearly always with large amounts of money about them. Darcy, Prébord, and many others were named. Nointel knew Simancas's writing, and possessed a specimen of it: the note which the scoundrel had written to him telling him not to visit the marchioness again. So he was fully prepared to prove that Simancas had directed the operations of the highwaymen who, for several months, had waylaid the Parisians in the streets. "It is a complete case," he muttered; "and now, if the general does not take his leave within forty-eight hours, I have here wherewith to bring him to reason, without the intervention of Crozon, who is so anxious to exterminate him. The Pole had decidedly some good points. He was a methodical man, and carefully preserved useful documents; besides, I am not yet at the end of my discoveries. The collar of his pelisse is a surprise-box, an inexhaustible one."

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Nointel again took the scissors and finished the autopsy. An envelope fell from the lining, now ripped from one end to the other—an envelope which was crumpled and had turned yellow from its prolonged sojourn under the sable—an envelope which had never been sealed, and bore no address. It contained three folded letters, and the captain merely had to glance at them to see that they had not been written by the same person, although they were in feminine handwritings. "This time, I hold the great secret," he murmured. "It is just as I thought. Golymino kept a specimen of each of his mistresses' style; he collected the autographs of these ladies, and did not confide them all to Julia. He had his reserve, which he would have made use of sooner or later. Fortunately, it has fallen into my hands, and I will make good use of these letters. Let us look at this one in the first place—an English style of handwriting, very regular—the lines are straight and well spaced. What does this woman call herself? Mathilde. That was Madame Crozon. I could have guessed it even before reading the signature. The epistle is tender and sad. Poor woman! She has paid dearly for her folly. Now for the other—a marchioness's coronet—that is from Madame de Barancos—she did not mistrust her lover, for she signed 'Carmen de Pénafiel' in full. That boldness is just like her. What did she write to this Pole?" Nointel turned the letter so as to read it, but he did not do so. The blood rushed to his face, and his courage failed him. "No," he said, throwing the paper upon the table—"no, I do not wish to know what she wrote to him. I should suffer too much."

It was not, however, without regret that he renounced the bitter pleasure of perusing the impassioned effusions of this proud Spanish lady who had captivated his heart, and had stooped to love a swindler, to say no worse. He hesitated a long time, and deserves some merit for finally resisting the temptation. Out of one hundred lovers, ninety-nine would have yielded to it. And let it be asked of captivated women what they would have done if subjected to such a test? One letter remained to be examined, and the captain had no doubt but that it came from Golymine's third mistress—from the stragler of the ball—the vindictive creature who had stabbed Julia d'Orceival. She did not inspire Nointel with either interest or pity, and he felt no scruple about penetrating her secrets. He commenced by looking for the signature; but found none. No surname, no Christian name, not even an initial. Nothing but a flourish, which might have represented any letter of the alphabet. "The deuce!" he said, between his teeth, "I am not much further advanced than I was before I bought Golymine's pelisse. The letter of so prudent a person is no doubt so worded as not to compromise her. Nevertheless, the writing is easily recognisable. It resembles no other. These are very fine but very legible letters, round and inclined to the left. Let me see if the language will furnish me with a clue."

The language was no doubt very clear to the man who had inspired it. It expressed, in happily-chosen terms, a violent, but restrained, passion. Much was said of hidden enjoyment—of secret delights. Jealousy manifested itself in each line—jealousy, without which there is no true love; here and there a transport of discreet tenderness; veiled allusions to certain episodes of a connection which appeared to have lasted for some time; but nothing which could furnish the least clue to the habits of the lady—nothing which indicated whether she was married or a widow. Each word seemed to have been weighed, each sentence arranged, to lead

conjecture astray. The style was that of a woman of good birth; and that woman was, no doubt, remarkably intelligent; for her letter was a masterpiece. She said all she wished to say, but in such a way as to be only understood by her lover.

"Dash it!" exclaimed Nointel, "it must be admitted that I am not in luck. I spend a hundred louis in order to procure the solution of an enigma which interests no one but the magistrate, and I fall upon an unintelligible note. What a diplomat this anonymous writer is! Ah! she has nothing to fear; Monsieur Darcy won't discover her. The opera house mystery will never be cleared up, and after all there will not be much harm done. Mademoiselle Lestrel and Madame de Barancos are no longer in the case, and Madame Cambry will not be sorry to have her future husband abandon this affair, which so absorbs him. Julia will not be avenged, but, after all, surely it was with no good intention that she enticed Golymine's victims into her box. It has not been proved to me that she did not endeavour to extort a ransom from the woman who killed her. She had to deal with some one more able than herself, and it cost her her life. That was expensive, but she must have known very well that she was playing a dangerous game. Now that I have read this puzzling epistle, I will bet that, on going to the rendezvous, the lady knew perfectly well how many times she had written to Golymine. When she had gained possession of her letters she counted them in the corridor before leaving the theatre. She found that one was missing. She said to herself that Julia d'Orcival had kept it so as to play her a bad turn, and she boldly returned and killed the d'Orcival. That is what it is to have order in love affairs. It isn't Madame de Barancos who would have numbered her love-letters, and she would be very much astonished if I returned her the one I have just found. But I shall not return it to her; she would never believe that I haven't read it; it would be better to burn it. Yes, but if I burn it, Monsieur Darcy will again reproach me for having acted inconsiderately. In any case I must hand him the letter of the unknown woman, and that as soon as possible. Where shall I find him now? At his residence or at the Palais? I don't know, but I mean to search for him till we meet."

IX.

ON the morrow of the memorable day when Nointel, by dint of money and perseverance, became the possessor of Golymine's pelisse, Gaston Darcy, after breakfasting quickly and alone, was finishing his toilet in the dressing-room, where he had one morning given audience to Julia d'Orcival's maid. He had just received a note from Madame Cambry, who begged him to call and see her, and, if he could, to bring his friend the captain with him.

"I don't know Monsieur Nointel's address," wrote the charming widow; "and I particularly wish to speak to him. I hope he will excuse me for inviting him through you. If it pleased you both to devote your evening to me, I should be very happy to keep you to dinner. We would talk about Berthe, who cannot at present leave the house where her unfortunate sister has just died. Your friend has done a deal to demonstrate the poor child's innocence, and he will not be out of place in a conversation of which she will be the chief subject."

Gaston asked no better than to go in search of Nointel, for he had many things to say to him, and had not seen him since they had separated in the Rue Caumartin. He was even astonished that Nointel had given him no signs of life during the last thirty-six hours, and asked himself in what way the captain could have employed his time. He knew that his uncle had met him at Madame Cambry's the day before, but that was all. It required but little more to lead him to accuse him of indifference, but he did not wish to condemn him unheard, and hoped that he would be able to justify himself without trouble. He had just rung for his valet, to ask him if his brougham was ready, when M. Roger Darcy entered unannounced. "Good morning, my dear uncle," said Gaston gaily.

"You arrive just in time. I am going in search of Nointel to take him to Madame Cambry's; she wishes to see him. Shall we go there together?"

"Yes," replied the magistrate; "I will call on your friend all the more readily as he called twice to ask for me yesterday, at the Palais and at my residence. But I passed the afternoon with my notary, and the evening with a counsellor. To-day I am free. The investigation is suspended, as you know; so I can give you all my time. But before accompanying you to see Monsieur Nointel, I have something to say to you."

Gaston looked at his uncle and saw that he had assumed his magisterial face. "What is the worry, then?" he asked, anxiously. "Has anything happened which again brings into question the——"

"No, no; reassure yourself," replied the magistrate, smiling. "Mademoiselle Lestrel's innocence is solidly established, and I entertain profound esteem for her. I can even tell you that opinion has changed in her favour. Her story has become known. Several of my colleagues have spoken to me of her with admiration, almost with enthusiasm; and when it is announced that you are going to marry her, no one will blame you."

"Not even you, uncle?"

"I, less than any one else. I approve of this marriage, and hope with all my heart that it will take place as soon as possible."

"At the same time as yours, uncle."

"That is precisely the subject I have come to talk about with you. Yes, my dear Gaston, I have come to consult you. This is turning the world upside down, is it not? But there are cases when it is necessary to go back to old principles. And then, I think you have become more reasonable. Real love has rendered you more serious, and the crisis you have just passed through has rendered you prudent. So listen to me, and answer me in all sincerity. Do you remember an interview we had together at my fireside on the day after the suicide of that Pole, who made so many victims before his death—and even after it?"

"Perfectly. You showed me some police memoranda in reference to Julia d'Orcival."

"And in regard to Golymine. I did very wrong in not attaching more importance to them. If the D'Orcival's residence had been searched, the famous letters would have been found there, and there would have been no crime at the opera house. But that is not the matter in question. Do you also remember that I gave you an ultimatum? I declared to you that if you were not married within three months, I myself should marry, with the sole object of perpetrating our race. A few days after that you presented me a candidate who did not altogether please me, but whom I did

not absolutely reject. The next day, unheard-of fatalities took place, Mademoiselle Lestérel became impossible; you all the same courageously announced your resolution of marrying her, or of remaining a bachelor; and, in presence of these two alternatives, which seemed to me equally regrettable, I decided to marry Madame Cambry."

"And I rejoiced at that decision—I rejoice at it still."

"Oh! I render you justice, my dear Gaston. You showed yourself, as always, affectionate and disinterested. That is an additional reason why I should submit this matter which embarrasses me to you. We had then both decided to get married. The name of Darcy no longer ran the risk of dying out. But I was convinced that you would change your opinion if Mademoiselle Lestérel were condemned, as I did not doubt she would be, and it was this conviction which impelled me to take the perilous step of marriage. Madame Cambry was very pleasing to me, and was quite willing to tell me that I did not displease her; but I am twenty years older than she is, and I should certainly not have overstepped that great disparity could I have hoped that my nephew would some day give me some legitimate grand-nephews."

"You will have grand-nephews, and sons as well. That will be better."

"Perhaps so; but in that case your children will not inherit from me. I know that this consideration does not move you. Nevertheless, I cannot help thinking that I have failed to keep the agreement formulated by myself. I was not to marry unless you failed, within three months, to present me an acceptable *fiancée*. Now, a month has scarcely elapsed, and the *fiancée* is found—a *fiancée* whom I honour and love. Not only have I no objection to raise against your choice, but I am, so to speak, interested in having you marry Mademoiselle Lestérel, for she has suffered through me, and you alone can make reparation for the wrong I have involuntarily done her. That is why, my dear boy, I think it will be just for us to adhere strictly to the conditions that I laid down to you some weeks ago. You will marry before the allotted time; your marriage will be acceptable to me. It then becomes useless for me to marry. It is enough for one Darcy to perpetuate the name."

"You are not talking seriously," exclaimed Gaston.

"Very seriously. I announced that on arriving."

"But, uncle, you are engaged to Madame Cambry. She has the deepest, the most sincere affection for you. She is worthy of you, she has the right to rely upon your word, and, really, it seems to me that I am dreaming when I hear you remind me of I know not what agreement which I have forgotten, and which I wish to forget. Do you believe, then, that I would accept your inheritance if, in order to leave it to me, you sacrificed your happiness? Mademoiselle Lestérel would join with me, were it necessary, in begging you not to grieve her benefactress by renouncing a union which would fulfil the desires of the most charming and best of women. Berthe owes everything to Madame Cambry; Berthe will refuse to marry me if her marriage is to prevent you from marrying Madame Cambry."

"Listen to me, Gaston," said the magistrate, after a short silence.

"I was expecting the answer you have just made me, and perhaps it may determine me to go on, in spite of the real scruples which lead me to hesitate. Should Madame Cambry claim the execution of an engagement made by both parties in all sincerity, I could not avoid it, and I know that you would approve of my acting thus. But the moment has arrived

to inform you that, for a few days past, Madame Cambry appears to me to be less determined than she was when we exchanged promises. I don't think that she has given up the marriage which she seemed to desire equally with myself, but she is certainly in less hurry to celebrate it. We had fixed it between us for the end of April, and that was not too soon, for nothing is more wearisome and awkward than the situation of an engaged couple during the time which elapses between the betrothal and the marriage—especially when the future husband is forty-five years of age. Well, when I spoke to her yesterday of definitely fixing the date of the ceremony, she seemed disposed to postpone it.”

“You surprise me more than I can tell. She wished to be married on the same day as Berthe. Did she give you a motive?”

“None, unless it is that the anguish through which Mademoiselle Lestérel has passed had made a strong impression upon her, and she feared she would not have sufficiently recovered from her emotion to marry in five weeks' time. Your friend Nointel, whom I found at her house, had been conversing with her about the murder of Julia d'Orival, the death of Madame Crozon, and other lugubrious subjects; and I talked to her of the test to which I had submitted Madame de Barancos. I thought that these subjects had badly affected her, and withdrew without insisting. But this morning I received a letter from her in which, with all imaginable good grace, she expressly urges me to postpone our marriage until the vacations, when I shall be relieved, she says, of the sad anxiety caused to me by the investigation of the opera house affair. She adds that, in the meanwhile, we will marry you to Berthe, and that the sight of your happiness will give her patience.”

“She talked quite differently to me. This change is very strange.”

“So strange that I believe myself authorised to claim my liberty. I shall disengage myself with all possible discretion, but I *shall* disengage myself, and I think that Madame Cambry will not seek to retain me. She will easily find a husband better suited to her age. As for me, I shall think of her with regret, I don't hide it from myself; but, after all, I am not very sorry to remain a bachelor. For more than forty years I have practiced celibacy, and it has become a habit with me. You will charge yourself with furnishing me with family joys. And, in that connection, I must confide to you a resolution I have taken. You are going to be married. This is the proper time for entering the magistracy. Your union with Mademoiselle Lestérel will not be an obstacle; on the contrary, you have shown qualities in this affair which are wanting in many magistrates. You and your friend Nointel have prevented a judicial error, and you would both make excellent magistrates. He, who has been a hussar, would not care to barter the sword for the gown, but with you it is different. You are of my blood, and would replace me advantageously. I would secure you an appointment as a public prosecutor's substitute in the jurisdiction of Paris; I should obtain this all the more easily since I am going to create a vacancy by resigning.”

“You resign, uncle! surely you don't think of it?”

“I think of it so much that it is a thing decided upon in my mind. My dear fellow, a man must know how to retreat after a defeat. This affair of the opera house has been my Waterloo. Yes, yes, it is useless for you to try to explain the disaster so as to spare my self-love. I don't conceal from myself that I have manœuvred the whole time like a conscript. I took the wrong road from the start, a little more and I should

have sent an innocent girl before the Assizes. She is saved thanks to two worthy lads of my acquaintance, but I feel that I shall not find the guilty woman. There is a fatality about this investigation, and I am determined to withdraw from it. I don't wish to expose myself to a second reverse."

"And it is at the moment when you abandon a career which has been the occupation and honour of your whole life that you wish to renounce the happiness of marrying the woman who loves you and whom you love—for you do love her, I am sure of it. No, uncle, no, you will not do that—I ask it of you in the name of the affection you bear me. Madame Cambry awaits me. Authorise me to speak to her of your scruples, of the sorrow her hesitation causes you, and I swear to you that——"

Gaston did not finish. "The door of the room suddenly opened, and Nointel entered. He was radiant, and went straight to M. Darcy, who exclaimed while offering him his hand: "I deeply regret, sir, not to have been at home when you took the trouble to call yesterday. You had, no doubt, something to inform me of?"

"Something to hand you, sir," replied the captain, joyously. "The most unheard-of chance in the world has placed in my hands a letter written to Golymine by the woman who killed Julia d'Orcival—I have brought it to you."

"How! what proof have you of——"

"Oh! it is as clear as daylight. Yesterday I met a friend of this Golymine on the boulevard, a certain Simancas——"

"Who calls himself a general in the Peruvian service, eh?" interrupted M. Darcy. "It was yesterday, precisely, that I sent in search of him as well as of a Dr. Saint-Galmier, who was with him in a box adjoining the one in which the crime was committed. I had already heard them at the commencement of the investigation, but after the test to which Madame de Barancos submitted, I thought that it would be useful to question them again——"

"That explains to me why they had so frightened an appearance. Saint-Galmier's servant had come to warn his master that a police officer had presented himself. The scoundrels thought that they were going to be arrested. For these foreigners are scoundrels. I have the proof of that, and will show it to you; but allow me, in the first place, to relate to you how I got the letter. Simancas entered the auction rooms in the Rue Drouot. I followed him there. Golymine's effects were being sold; among others a certain furred pelisse, which Simancas ran up furiously. I suspected that this garment contained the Pole's secrets. I also bid: and the pelisse fell to me, to Simancas's great despair. I took it home, ripped open the collar, and found there, in the first place, papers which will edify you in regard to the antecedents of Golymine and his friends—who had organised the nocturnal attacks which have been so frequent this winter—and also three letters from women. The first, signed Mathilde, is from Madame Crozon; the second, signed Carmen de Penafiel, and stamped with the coronet of a marchioness, is from Madame de Barancos; the third, not signed at all, is evidently from the Pole's third mistress—he had kept one of the letters from each of them, one only."

"My dear fellow," said Gaston, who listened absent-mindedly to Nointel's narrative, "I am sorry to interrupt you, but I think my uncle could just as well listen to your statement at his office, and I am in a hurry to take you to see Madame Cambry, who is waiting for us."

M. Roger Darcy understood that Gaston was anxious to plead his cause with the beautiful widow, and felt no ill-will towards him for his zeal. "Indeed, sir," he commenced, while addressing himself to Nointel, "perhaps it would be as well to proceed regularly. I am going to the Palais on leaving here, and will receive you there. The discovery you have made may be of great importance. The letter is not signed, did you say?"

"No; but the writing is characteristic; the style, also, and——"

"Come now, babbler, stop. I repeat to you that Madame Cambry impatiently awaits us. Read that," continued Gaston, holding before Nointel's eyes the pressing note which he had received shortly before the arrival of the examining magistrate.

"It was Madame Cambry who wrote that!" exclaimed the captain.

"I won't detain you, gentlemen," interrupted M. Darcy; "we will continue the conversation in my office after you have seen Madame Cambry. You might, however, hand me the letter now; I could study it before your arrival. Did you not tell me just now that you had brought it to me?"

"No," stammered Nointel, "I was mistaken. I did not foresee that I should meet you here—and—I haven't it with me."

"It is quite natural that you should have left it at home," said M. Darcy, somewhat surprised to see the captain's embarrassment. "It matters little, however, whether I examine it now or in an hour's time, for it is unfortunately not probable that I should recognise the writing. But I don't despair of making use of your fortunate discovery later on. Should I succeed in doing so, I shall owe you, my dear sir, very great thanks, and I am even now under obligations to you. May I rely upon your bringing me at the Palais all the papers you found, and also the garment which contained them? I suppose that Madame Cambry will not detain you long," added the magistrate, giving his nephew a glance which was equal to a request to shorten Nointel's visit to the widow.

That was just what Gaston expected to do, for he was anxious to try to overcome Madame Cambry's hesitation in regard to the marriage, and could only touch on that delicate question in a private interview.

"I shall merely take the necessary time to call at my residence on leaving the Avenue d'Eylau," replied Nointel.

"I might even now, I think," continued M. Darcy, "issue an order of arrest against this pretended general and this pretended doctor."

"That is all the more urgent, as I suspect that they are preparing to cross the frontier. They now know that they are lost, and will not remain in Paris. I must, however, observe to you that their arrest may be followed by sad consequences to other persons. These rascals would proclaim Madame Crozon's and Madame Barancos' shame in open court. Madame Crozon is dead, but her husband is still in this world, and he is a worthy sailor, who is deserving of some regard. As to the marchioness——"

"Oh! Madame de Barancos is going away, never to return," said M. Darcy. "She wrote to me last evening, after the examination she submitted to in my office. She wrote to ask me if I saw any impediment to her leaving France, and I replied to her that I should offer none. I have no longer the shadow of a doubt as to her innocence, and the resolution she has taken is a very wise one, for everything is discovered in Paris;

her story will end by becoming known, and the evil rumours that will circulate in regard to her would render her living here an impossibility. Monsieur Crozon is a widower. He will not delay returning to sea again. There is nothing, then, to fear from Golymine's accomplices, and I am going to have them arrested. They will perhaps help me in finding their friend's third mistress, the one who killed Julia d'Orcival."

Nointel remained silent. He was thinking of the marchioness's approaching departure, and he was anxious to see her. He thought especially of something which he himself had just become acquainted with, and which had wholly changed the current of his ideas. "Come," exclaimed Gaston, "do you wish to accompany me, yes or no? For you to decide, is it necessary to remind you once more that Madame Cambry awaits us?"

"I have not forgotten it," muttered Nointel. "Let us go, since Monsieur Darcy is willing."

The uncle, the nephew, and the captain went out together. Two broughams were waiting in the Rue Montaigne. The magistrate entered his own, to be taken to the Palais de Justice, and the two friends started towards the Avenue d'Eylau at the quick trot of an excellent horse. "Madame Cambry will thank me for having brought you; but, when you have gone, I shall have a deal to say to her," said Gaston. "Would you believe it, that she now hesitates about marrying my uncle, and that I shall be obliged to resort to eloquence to try and persuade her to conclude a marriage which will make two persons happy?"

"Two, that is many," muttered Nointel. "One is never sure of those things. When did this somewhat tardy hesitation arise?"

"Yesterday, after the conversation you had with her; but it is, I think, only a passing whim. The crime at the opera house, with what has followed, has upset her. She fears that the investigation may spoil her honeymoon; and it is a fact that my uncle will be much disturbed in his conjugal duties by his magisterial ones; but I have an excellent argument to bring forward to reassure her. He has just told me that he has resolved to resign."

"That is a capital idea of his."

"You find it so?"

"Yes; the affair he investigates may cause him a deal of unpleasantness."

"It seems to me, however, that it is in a good way. This letter which you are going to take to him will help him to discover the culprit."

"That is something I don't hope for."

"What are you saying?"

"My dear fellow, sometimes in life there are mysteries which it is best not to clear up. The woman who killed Julia evidently belongs to fashionable society. If, by chance, she should belong to the society frequented by your uncle—if he should chance to know her—he would find himself in an atrocious situation. I recall what I experienced when Madame de Barancos was under suspicion. Do you remember what you suffered after the arrest of Mademoiselle Lestérel?"

"What connection do you see between my case, yours, and——"

"For your uncle it would be worse. And I am of the same opinion as Madame Cambry, who would like her future husband to abandon this affair. Mademoiselle Lestérel and Madame de Barancos have nothing more to fear. I am not at all anxious that public vengeance, as the gentle-

men of the public prosecutor's office say, should be satisfied. Do you care for public vengeance?"

"Not more than is necessary; but all the same----"

"Bah! don't take the part of society. You are not yet a magistrate."

"No; but I am going to be one. My uncle wishes it."

"Be one, then; but don't contradict me when you hear me tell Madame Cambry what I think about this case."

Darcy no longer insisted. He understood nothing of the hidden meaning of his friend's words, and attached no importance to them. Nointel on his side had no desire to say anything more, and the conversation suddenly dropped. It was quite natural that the captain should be silent. At that very moment a tempest was raging in his brain; he found himself in the presence of a terrible dilemma, and but a few minutes remained to him in which to determine his course, for the horse which was taking him towards Madame Cambry's residence was going at the speed of six leagues an hour. "What does your future aunt wish to talk to me about?" asked Nointel, curtly, just as the brougham stopped before the gate.

"Why--about Mademoiselle Lestrel, I suppose," replied Gaston.

"At least she says so in the letter I have just shown you."

"Writing was given to women to hide their thoughts," muttered the captain.

They were awaited. A footman received them at the entrance, and conducted them at once to the apartments where Madame Cambry never showed herself except to her intimate friends. On the stairs they passed Dame Jacinthe, whom the captain had never seen, and whom he looked at with much attention. "Who is that venerable person?" he asked, in a low tone.

"A woman who, I think, was Madame Cambry's nurse, and who is now her housekeeper," replied Darcy. "She is very devoted to her."

"I don't doubt it. I doubt it so little that, if I had the honour of marrying Madame Cambry, I should dismiss that duchess the day after my marriage."

"Are you becoming insane?"

"No, I am becoming wise."

This strange dialogue soon came to an end. The two friends were announced, and the beautiful widow came to meet them with eager graciousness. "I am infinitely obliged to you for having come, sir," she said to Nointel, extending to him a hand which she at once withdrew as she saw that the captain did not seem disposed to take it. "Thanks, my dear Gaston," she continued, addressing herself to Darcy, "thanks for having accompanied your friend. I saw your dear Berthe this morning, and have a thousand things to say to you. Does your uncle know that I asked you to call on me?"

"Yes, madame, we have just left him. He was going to the Palais."

"Did he tell you that I had written to him?" asked the widow, seating herself, and inviting her two visitors to do the same.

"Yes," replied Gaston, with an embarrassed air. "I even mean to talk with you of certain ideas which occurred to him after reading it, and which you will, I hope, help me to overcome. Nointel will be obliged to go and join him, and ----"

"You are too discreet, my dear Gaston. I have nothing to hide from Monsieur Nointel, and I am even anxious to confide to him the resolution I have taken, for I am certain that he will approve of it. He has, like me,

a horror of all these lugubrious proceedings which at this moment absorb your uncle, and he will find that I am right in postponing my marriage until the vacations."

"Yes, certainly," said the captain, quickly; "and I can understand, madame, that it is repugnant to you to hear the crime of the opera house unceasingly talked of. The newspapers are full of it. At all the clubs, and in all the drawing rooms, people no longer approach each other without asking if the person who made so bad a use of the Japanese poniard has at last been found. It is distressing. But I can reassure you. The investigation is reaching its end."

"Monsieur Darcy abandons it?"

"No; but it has taken an immense step. There has been discovered—in the collar of a pelisse which belonged to Golymine—it is almost miraculous—there has been discovered a letter written to that Pole by his third mistress, the one who killed Julia."

"A letter—signed?"

"No; but the writing has an individual character which will certainly be recognised—Monsieur Roger Darcy has no doubt of it."

"And—the letter is in his hands?"

"Not yet; but I shall hand it to him within an hour, for it was I who had the good fortune of laying hands on that precious paper. I bought the pelisse at the auction-rooms. I ransacked it, and drew from it three notes, which this Golymine had laid aside, probably with the intention of extorting money some day from the imprudent writers of them. One came from the unfortunate Madame Crozon, another from the Marchioness de Barancos, and the third from a very distinguished and very skilful woman, who took every imaginable precaution so as not to be known. Only, she forgot that one must always take chance into account. And by chance, among those who will see this note, there might be one who is already acquainted with her writing."

There came a spell of silence. Gaston had listened absent-mindedly, thinking that the captain was indulging in useless digressions. Madame Cambry, however, was very attentive, but she seemed in no hurry to reply to Nointel, who continued: "It is strange, in truth, the drama which will be disclosed within a few days, or a few hours. Don't you see the hand of Providence in this unexpected issue? And what odd and unlooked-for changes! A first discovery—the poniard-fan—leads to the accusation of Mademoiselle Lestérel. A second discovery—the sleeve button—leads to the accusation of Madame de Barancos. Two innocent persons. But Providence finally intervenes. The letter is found, and this time the culprit is taken—or, at least, she will be."

"Taken!" said Madame Cambry, straightening herself up. "How do you know that?"

"Oh! it is now but a question of time. And since this story seems to interest you, will you permit me, madame, to add to it the narrative of the perplexities I have just passed through? It is a somewhat ridiculous one, for *meré chiméras* are in question. My imagination sometimes plays me these tricks. Well, after laying my hand on this letter, I set myself to supposing that some circumstance would inform me from whom it came. Why not? A misfortune, it is said, never comes alone. Neither does an accident. And while I was in the vein of conjectures, I again supposed that I had met the woman who wrote it, in society; that I was on friendly terms with her; that she inspired me with very deep sympathy——"

"Suppose at once that you were in love with her," said Madame Cambry, laughing in a somewhat forced manner; "that would be still more touching. Besides, isn't that precisely your position with Madame de Barancos?"

"No, for the marchioness has killed no one. And then; this time, other ideas occurred to me. I recalled Dumas' comedy the 'Demi-Monde,' which you certainly saw played at the Français; I imagined to myself that the lady in question was about to marry one of my friends, a worthy man, and I asked myself what I should do in such a case. I must tell you that the character of Olivier de Jalin in the play was always odious to me. He was not the friend of the fool who wished to marry the Baronne d'Ange, and the Baronne d'Ange had been his mistress. The situation I invented was not at all the same. Madame d'Ange had merely some love affairs to reproach herself with, and this lady has a revolting murder on her conscience. I said to myself that she had never compromised herself for me, and that her future husband was closely connected with me, a near relation, if you like. And I said to myself: Let us leave aside the social duty which obliges me to hand the perpetrator of a crime over to justice. Suppose I don't accept that duty, that I refuse to denounce a woman. There still remains my duty as a relative, or even simply as a friend. Can I allow a worthy man to be deceived, allow him to unite his destiny with that of a person who has committed a murder—although that murder were attended with many extenuating circumstances?"

"No," painfully articulated Madame Cambry.

"That is also my opinion, madame," continued Nointel, who was perfectly calm; "but here the great difficulties present themselves. If I warned this worthy man of the danger which threatens him, the woman is ruined—her reputation, in the first place, for it was known by society that the marriage was determined upon, and society would discover the cause of the rupture; but that is not all. I have forgotten to speak to you of another chimera which presented itself. I supposed that the future husband was a magistrate, obliged by his functions to follow up this very crime of the opera house. See in what a fearful position I should place him by informing him of the truth. A hundred times more dreadful than mine; and, nevertheless, I swear to you that were I put to this test, I should suffer all that can be suffered by one who has a heart. Indeed, I think I should finish by taking a singular course—that of consulting the woman whose honour and life are at stake."

Gaston Darcy asked himself what absurd fancy had led his friend to amuse himself by arguing in this style, by imagining scruples of conscience, and submitting them to Madame Cambry. As a rule Nointel was not given to argument, but spoke to women in another tone. And Darcy was also astonished to see that Madame Cambry did not try to turn the conversation to a less serious and more personal subject. She listened, with a patience which he admired, to arguments which could have little interest for her, and her eyes seemed to be trying to read in Nointel's face what he was aiming at. "Yes," continued the captain, "I shall go and find the imprudent woman who wrote this letter to Golymine, this letter which I have here in my pocket——"

"What?" interrupted Gaston, "you told my uncle just now that you had forgotten it at your residence."

"That is true; I told him that, but I was mistaken. I have the letter on my person."

Gaston made a gesture which signified: He is certainly losing his mind; but Madame Cambry exclaimed with restrained emotion: "Continue, sir. What would you say to this imprudent woman?"

"I should say to her: Madame, your fate is in my hands. It lies with me either to ruin or spare you. I know that you are guilty, I have the proof of it; I bear no hatred against you, but I am deeply attached to the man you are about to marry. If I don't denounce you, I become your accomplice, and commit an unworthy action. It is as though I failed to stop my best friend at the moment when he was walking towards a precipice which he was not aware of, but which I saw. If I denounce you, I kill you and dishonour him—for it is known in society that his marriage with you is decided upon. The scandal would be frightful, and I know this honest man—he would not survive it. What is to be done? What course is to be taken? Give me advice, you who have created this terrible situation." And as Madame Cambry remained silent, Nointel continued, coldly:

"I suppose it is well understood that this woman is not a debased creature, that a fatal passion urged her on to commit a murder in a momentary disorder, but that she has not a debased soul, and did not conceive the odious project of marrying a magistrate in order to shield herself from the punishment she deserves; I suppose that this marriage had been decided upon before the night of the crime, and that afterwards she was unable to find the opportunity and means of breaking it off. I suppose that she has repented, and that she now only aspires to expiate the past."

"Expiate!" said Madame Cambry, in a muffled voice; "she has been expiating it for a long time already."

"I think as you do, madame. Her life must have been a terrible one. To hear an innocent woman accused, to know that she is in prison, that she will be condemned, and not to be able to justify her without surrendering one's self—that is a torment which Dante forgot in his 'Inferno.' And the proof that she has repented is found in the fact that she wept on the tomb of the woman she killed; that she was willing to pay for the ground in which her victim reposes. The murder remains. But I am sure that she had not premeditated it. I divine all that took place at that ball at the opera house, to which she was compelled to go with the alternative of leaving her correspondence in the hands of a D'Orceval. I see her leaving the box, disturbed, upset by a degrading interview. She counts the letters which have cost her so dear—she knows their number—she perceives that they are not all there; she thinks that the woman D'Orceval has kept one of them to use it against her at a later period, to hold her at her mercy; she returns to the box—she enters it; the D'Orceval insults her, threatens her, perhaps; she snatches the poniard from her—she strikes——"

"Enough," murmured Madame Cambry.

"What pleasure do you find in going over that lugubrious story again?" exclaimed Darcy. "Don't you see the painful impression you produce?"

"Madame Cambry will excuse me, I hope. And now it is to her that I dare to address myself in order to solve a difficulty which would perplex many a casuist. I dare to say to her: If my dream was a reality, and if you were in my place, what would you do?"

"I don't know what I should do were I in your place," replied Berthe

Lestérel's protectress, with an effort; "but if I were in the place of the unfortunate woman who wrote the letter which is in your possession, I should say to you: Don't fear that I shall drag with me into an abyss the man who wished to give me his name. I will not marry him. And if you keep to yourself the secret which chance has thrown into your hands, this man will always be ignorant of the terrible danger to which he was exposed."

"What guarantee should I have that the promise would be kept?"

"If it were not kept you could strike the perjurer, for the weapon would remain in your hands. But I am going, in my turn, to put a question to you: Suppose this woman, finally realising that no place remains for her in this world, should disappear for ever; suppose you learned that she had gone to conceal herself in some far-off solitude, or had buried herself in a convent, what would you do?"

"People return from the farthest countries, and French law no longer recognises perpetual vows," replied Nointel, after hesitating a little.

"You are right, sir. There are none but the dead who do not return," said Madame Cambry, in a husky voice.

"You did not allow me to finish, madame. I should not exact so much. It would suffice for me that the projected marriage should be irrevocably broken off. Much ado would be useless. A plausible pretext could easily be found to explain the rupture."

"And when this rupture was consummated, you would burn the letter."

"Perhaps. But I should assuredly not make use of it to ruin the woman who wrote it."

"You forget that you can no longer keep it. You told Monsieur Darcy that you were going to hand it to him. He awaits it."

"I should tell him that I had lost it, or that it had been stolen from me. He would blame me severely, and would no doubt think very badly of me, but my conscience would not reproach me. Fortunately, however, we only argue on hypotheses, and I think, like my friend Gaston, that I must have tired your patience in submitting them to you. I am all the more unpardonable since you had, I believe, matters less sad to converse with me about."

"Less sad, but very serious, nevertheless. I wished to talk with you about my dear Berthe, to thank you for all you have done for her, and to charge you with a delicate mission. Monsieur Gaston Darcy is interested in the matter, and he would refuse the service I wish to confide to you, sir, to you who have given us all so many proofs of devotion. I wish to release myself from a promise I formerly gave to Monsieur Roger Darcy, and I have chosen you to lay before him the reasons which have led to my determination to remain a widow."

"Don't you fear, madame, that he will be astonished by this choice? My friend Gaston would be in a much better position than I to conduct an affair of so private a nature."

"I decline," said Gaston, quickly.

"I was expecting that," continued Madame Cambry. "Your uncle has no doubt told you that I had written to him to ask him to postpone the date of our wedding; I am sure that he has understood my intentions, and he has too much tact to hesitate to release me from my promise. I am also sure that he has divined the motives of a decision which I shall not reconsider. He formerly made disclosures to me which I have not forgotten. He vowed to me that he should only marry in case his nephew

persisted in remaining a bachelor,⁶ or married against his wishes. It was his dream to leave his fortune to this nephew, who would charge himself with worthily perpetuating his name. I wish this dream to be realised. I wish Berthe to enjoy all the happiness which she deserves, and which she has so dearly purchased. Be sure that Monsieur Roger also wishes it. I know his heart, and I know that he ardently wishes to make reparation for a judicial error which has been followed by such cruel consequences."

"If Mademoiselle Lestérel heard you, madame," exclaimed Gaston, "she would join her prayers with mine to beg you not to sacrifice your happiness for interests which trouble her no more than they do myself. What matters my uncle's fortune to us? We shall always be sufficiently rich, as we love each other. And we also have our dream. We dream of living near you—near my uncle, who has stood in the place of a father to me; of binding closer by your marriage the ties which already unite us." "That dream was mine, my dear Gaston," said Madame Cambry, ~~ring~~ "but the awakening has come, and I have forgotten the dream. Forget it also, and be happy. Monsieur Nointel will willingly spare you the pain of informing Monsieur Roger Darcy that I renounce the honour of marrying him."

Her tone was so firm, her attitude so unmistakable, that Gaston, overcome, no longer dared to insist, but prepared to take his leave. The captain was already on his feet, but seemed to be waiting for a last word from Madame Cambry before leaving. "I rely upon you, sir," she continued; "you can rely upon me." Then, addressing herself to Gaston: "When you see Berthe tell her, if necessary, that I would die so that she might be happy, I would die without regret." And as Gaston, who was stupefied, sought for a reply to this very unexpected declaration, she added, simply: "Adieu, gentlemen."

"Madame," said Nointel with much emotion, "allow me to hope that we shall see each other again, and that we shall never talk of a past, which I wish no more to recall." And he led away his friend, who made a strange appearance, for he understood nothing of what had been said before him.

"Will you explain to me this strange comedy you have been playing?" said Darcy, as soon as he had taken his seat in the brougham beside the captain.

"Well, my dear fellow, I had some scruples. I asked myself if I had the right to deliver up to justice a woman who had never done me a wrong. Madame Cambry is exceedingly intelligent. I had the idea of submitting the case to her—dramatising it to suit myself. And you have seen that she was not offended by my boldness. It appears that she is of the same opinion as myself. She thinks that it would be best to leave the guilty one to her remorse."

"My uncle won't think so. He will demand those letters. If you did not wish to give them to him, you shouldn't have spoken of them."

"That is true, I did wrong. And I shall have to submit to the consequences of my mistake. But, if you will listen to me, you will have nothing more to do with the case, and I will leave Madame Cambry to do as she pleases. She is quite free to decline to be married, and I would bet that Monsieur Roger Darcy won't try to overcome her refusal. Resign yourself to inheriting from him some day, and remember that silence is golden. If you wish to be agreeable to me, you will never speak to me, or to any one else, of what has just taken place. Give your attention

to Mademoiselle Lestérel, and forget the crime at the opera house. The investigation is closed. And I hope the fiend may carry me off if I am ever persuaded to follow in Lolif's footsteps again. But we are now in the Champs-Élysées. Do me the pleasure of setting me down at the next turning."

"You know that my uncle awaits you?"

"Perfectly. I will see him, but he won't think badly of me if I go in the first place to get some news of Madame de Barancos. I will proceed to the Palais by way of the Avenue Ruysdaël."

Darcy remained silent. He was offended at the captain's enigmatical replies, but did not dare to press him closer. He vaguely felt that this reticence concealed a mystery which it was best he should not try to clear up. He allowed his friend to alight, receiving his promise to see him the next day.

Nointel crossed the Champs-Élysées, and seeing an empty cab sprang into it, giving Madame de Barancos' address. He no sooner closed the door of the vehicle than he drew the famous letter from his pocket. "This one is certainly from her," he said, between his teeth. "I needed but a glance at the note which Gaston showed me to recognise the writing. The charming and virtuous Madame Cambry was Golyminé's mistress, and stabbed Julia d'Orcival. If I had seen her note to Gaston one minute later she would have been ruined. I was about to deliver the autographs I took from Golyminé's pelisse to Monsieur Roger Darcy. He also had a narrow escape. It might have killed him outright. And if he knew that he was indebted to me for not being obliged to have the woman he meant to marry arrested, he would willingly forgive me what I am about to do. For I shall not give him the letter. The marriage is broken off; that is all that is necessary. If I handed the note to him, I should have the esteem of people who do not admit of any disobedience to the law; but I should not have self-esteem, for to reach a guilty one, who will punish herself, I should strike at one who is innocent. Yes, but he knows nothing about all that, and he will receive very badly the story I must invent to explain to him how it is that I no longer possess the papers I promised him. It will be of no use for me to tell him that they have been stolen from me. He won't believe a word of it, and he could, no doubt, find a clause in the Penal Code applicable to my case. It would be funny if, after all, I should be the only person condemned in this affair. Well, I would resign myself to that rather than wound Monsieur Darcy's heart by denouncing Madame Cambry to him. And then—why shouldn't I admit to myself that this unfortunate woman inspires me with pity, almost with interest? What she must have suffered, what she will still suffer, redeems her crime in a measure. What force of character she required not to betray herself just now when I put the question to her! She understood me at the first word, and did not weaken. If I had been alone with her, I think I should have returned her her letter. And with what an air she said to me: 'Adieu!' I shouldn't be astonished if she were to disappear, if she ended her days in some convent. Temporarily, however, I will keep the weapon I have against her, but I am almost certain that it will be a useless precaution."

These reflections brought Nointel to the door of the marchioness's residence. On arriving there, he saw the gate open and several footmen assembled in the courtyard. These men were chatting among themselves with an animation which augured badly. He alighted in all haste, and

made inquiries. The porter informed him that Madame de Barancos had just driven away in a post-chaise, without stating her destination or why she was going. She had taken her major-domo with her, and had left no orders with the other servants. The captain thought to himself that a great lady who is several times a millionaire does not run away like an actress pursued by her creditors. The marchioness could not be already on her way to America, and the idea occurred to Nointel that she had no doubt taken the road to her château at Sandouville, with the intention of isolating herself for a few days. He wished at any cost to see her again before she left France, and he was quite as well pleased not to return home that day, for he feared that the magistrate might go there in search of him. He was driven to the Western Railway Station, and took the first train which started on the road to Rouen.

When the locomotive drew up at the station of Bonnières, night was falling, and he had some trouble in hiring a vehicle to take him to the château. He succeeded, however, and three quarters of an hour after his arrival at Bonnières, he was on his way over the road he had followed but a few days before in a much more brilliant turn-out. The man who took him was unable to tell him whether the marchioness was at Sandouville or not. She always came there by post, and the road did not follow the same direction as the railway line. Nointel thus remained in painful suspense until the end of his journey, and his heart throbbed quickly when he saw some lights burning at the end of the great avenue. These lights were not motionless, however, like those which illuminate the windows of an occupied house. They were moving to and fro in the courtyard. The captain had his vehicle stopped outside the gate, and ordered the driver to wait for him. It was not certain if the marchioness had arrived; he did not even know whether she was coming, and he wished to inform himself before deciding how he would employ his evening.

In the courtyard he met several busy servants, who scarcely replied to the questions he addressed them; but he finally found the marchioness's steward, an old servant whom he knew from having seen him both at the Paris residence and the château. This man did not appear greatly surprised by the captain's apparition, and he at once informed him that Madame de Barancos had reached Sandouville during the day; that she had passed a few hours there, principally occupied in making inquiries concerning the inquest which had been held on the "beater," who had been killed, and that she had gone away, still by post, for an unknown destination. The steward added that the marchioness had informed her people of her intention to leave France, and that he was personally charged with managing her affairs until her return at, no doubt, some very distant date.

Nointel realised that it would be useless to try and learn more, and sadly took his way back to Bonnières. He could have returned to Paris by an evening or a night train, but he suspected that the Darceys, nephew and uncle, would be in search of him, and he did not mean to see them till the next day. He, therefore, decided to stay at an inn in the village, where he slept but little. The marchioness never left his thoughts. He could not conceal from himself that she had gone off suddenly, almost clandestinely, so as to avoid a farewell scene, which she had no doubt apprehended, and that he would perhaps never see her again. This thought grieved him the more since his love had but increased, and he had no hope that absence would cure it. Thus he was in an exceedingly ba

humour when he reached the Rue d'Anjou early the next day. His servant informed him that M. Darcy had been there three times the evening before, and he handed him two letters received during his absence. One was from Gaston, who wrote: "My uncle waited for you all day at the Palais. He is furious with you, and I have had all the trouble in the world to calm him. I advise you to go and see him as soon as possible, and I hope that you have given up your extravagant idea of not handing him the letter of the wretch who killed Julia. Should you destroy that note, you would place yourself in a very bad position, and distress me very much, for I am not of your opinion, and ardently desire that the guilty one may be punished."

"The Lord forgive him, for he knows not what he says," murmured Nointel. "If he suspected that Madame Cambry was the guilty one he would sing another tune. And as for his uncle, he can do what he likes; but even if he places me under arrest, he shall not have Golymine's note."

The captain's ideas were strongly fixed, but they soon took a different course, for the second letter which he opened, without looking at the handwriting of the address, proved to be from Madame de Barancos. It contained but one line, "I love you; I suffer martyrdom, and go away." It was almost the repetition of the historical phrase addressed by Marie Mancini to Louis XIV., at the time of the rupture of their amours, but, as may well be believed, this resemblance did not occur to Nointel. He had received a wound in the heart, and, after the fashion of lovers, he began commenting upon the marchioness's laconic farewell. It was certainly a farewell, but it was not a dismissal. It did not terminate with the classical words: "Forget me." She said she was going away, without saying where she was going; but she did not forbid the captain trying to discover the country where she meant to hide herself; she did not forbid his joining her. And he already promised himself not to be put off with this abrupt issue.

He had not much leisure that morning to think of the matter, however. His valet entered, just as he laid down Madame de Barancos' letter, and informed him that a woman in mourning wished to speak to him on behalf of Madame Cambry. Very much astonished, and still more mystified, Nointel gave orders for the woman to be shown in, and as soon as she appeared he recognised Dame Jacinthe. She walked towards him slowly, like the statue of the Commander in the opera of *Don Giovanni*. Without uttering a word, or waiting for Nointel to question her, she handed him a sealed note. Nointel, somewhat disturbed by her solemn manner, opened it precipitately and read these words, written by Madame Cambry in a firm hand. "You said to me yesterday: 'One returns from exile, one leaves a convent.' I replied to you: 'There are none but the dead who do not return.' I am going to die. Forgive me as I forgive you, and save my memory. Burn my letter."

"Dead!" exclaimed the captain. "She has killed herself!"

"Last night—at three o'clock," said Jacinthe, in a hollow voice.

"How?"

"She took poison—a quick poison which leaves no trace. If you keep silent no one will ever know that she killed herself."

"But—Monsieur Darcy?"

"Monsieur Darcy will learn in a few moments that my mistress has died from the rupture of an aneurism. It depends on you whether he shall mourn her or curse her."

"I have promised ; I will keep my promise."

"Keep it, then. What are you waiting for?"

While speaking Dame Jacinthe looked earnestly at Nointel, and her deep-set eyes glowed with a sombre light. Nointel understood. The letter was where he had placed it the night before—in his breast pocket. He took it out, and held it towards Dame Jacinthe, saying: "Do you recognise it?"

"Yes."

A candle was burning upon the mantel-shelf. Nointel held the paper to the flame, and kept it there until the last particle was consumed.

"Thank you," said Madame Jacinthe, simply. "And the other?"

The other was the note which her mistress had written just before her death. The captain understood, and duly submitted it to the candle flame. "That is well," continued Jacinthe. "My mission is ended. Adieu, sir." And she went out without Nointel trying to detain her.

"Poor woman!" he murmured. "She has meted out justice to herself, but she deserved a better fate. Julia is excessively avenged; and if I could have foreseen that the drama would end thus, I should have returned her the letter yesterday. The magistrate will never know the danger he has escaped; but he is just the man to reproach me for my conduct in this affair, and I must have an explanation with him without losing a minute. By this time, indeed, he must have been informed of the event—it is the moment for me to present myself—he will be too much affected to dispute with me."

The captain did not take time to change his clothes. He sent his servant to fetch him a cab, and was driven to the Rue Rougemont. He arrived just in time to meet the uncle and nephew in the courtyard. M. Roger Darcy was very pale, and Gaston's face was greatly disturbed. "Here you are, sir," exclaimed the magistrate. "Do you know the terrible news?"

"I have just heard of it," replied the captain, quite determined not to reveal in what way he had been informed.

"You will then excuse my not receiving you. I went to your residence three times yesterday and regretted, and was surprised not to meet you there. You have, no doubt, brought me that letter?"

"No, sir. I no longer have it. It has been stolen from me."

The magistrate shrugged his shoulders, that was all. "Those foreigners I called your attention to had an interest in suppressing the proofs of their complicity with Golymine," continued Nointel, who thought it as well to give some colour to his untruth. "They gained access to my room in my absence, and the papers I found in the pelisse have disappeared."

M. Darcy looked at the captain as though he was trying to fathom his thoughts, and, as the captain did not falter, he saluted him with an inclination of the head and passed on.

"Ah! my friend, what a frightful catastrophe," said Gaston, who stopped to shake Nointel's hand.

"Frightful, indeed, and very unexpected."

"One would have said, however, that Madame Cambry had foreseen it, for she had made her will. She leaves me her whole fortune."

"Shall you accept it?"

"Yes, to transmit it to the poor in her name."

"You will do well."

M. Darcy had already entered his brougham, which awaited him at the gate. His nephew hastened to join him. The horse started off towards the Avenue d'Eylau, and Nointel went his way murmuring: "I do not believe that that gallant man will ever speak to me about the letter again. He divined everything." Was Nointel mistaken? He does not know yet, nor will he ever know.

Many months have elapsed, and the mystery which enveloped the crime at the opera house has not been cleared up. The investigation has been abandoned. Paris no longer thinks of it. Lolif alone occupies himself about it in his leisure moments. He has, however, other cares. Various crimes have given him a deal to do during the last few months. One day, however, towards the end of April, he thought that the affair of the D'Orceval murder was about to assume a new aspect. The *Gazette des Tribunaux* announced that the sleeve-button, the other one, which completed the pair, had been found in a sewer-trap in the Avenue d'Eylau. It was a false alarm, however. No one could tell who had thrown it there, and not a jeweller recognised it. Madame Cambry's death did not give rise to any comments among the public. The friends of the charming widow deeply regretted her, and Bertho Lestérel mourns for her still — will always mourn for her. Gaston has devoted the fortune that Madame Cambry bequeathed to him to the endowment of an hospital and an asylum for poor young girls. The will assured an independent position to Dame Jacinthe, who has gone to end her days in a distant part of the country. Gaston is not yet a magistrate, but his nomination is signed, and he will be married very shortly. His uncle has sent in his resignation, and has gone to spend the summer at the seaside to recover from the violent shocks which have seriously impaired his health. He will return to be present at the wedding, and then intends to travel for a year.

The marchioness's disappearance caused a deal of excitement. It has been explained in a hundred different ways. Some have seen nothing but a great lady's whim in it. Others have invented and circulated malevolent stories. No one has divined the truth. People were very curious to know where Madame de Barancos had gone. It was at first thought that she had merely returned to Havana, but it was finally learned that she was sailing in the Mediterranean on a yacht she had procured in England. She had been seen in the waters of the Levant. She spent Easter at Jerusalem, and lived during the month of May in a kiosk on the Bosphorus. Recently she has been heard of nearer France. The yacht carrying her colours has been signalled in the Sicilian waters, and certain well-informed people state that she has bought a delightful villa near Palermo, where she lives independent and alone. She does not receive the local magnates, and the brigands who hold the surrounding country respect her.

Nointel, after remaining in Paris until the latter part of July, has just left without stating his precise destination. All that Gaston Darcy knows of the matter is that his friend has gone southwards, and this whim greatly astonishes him. Indeed, the captain has gone to the land of the sun in dog-day heat. It is true that he formerly campaigned in Algeria and Mexico; and, besides, lovers are indifferent to seasons and climates alike. Nointel would have repaired to the North Pole had the marchioness taken it into her head to fix her tent in the Arctic regions.

Those delightful gentlemen, Simancas and Saint-Galmier, have sailed for other shores, and it is probable that the Parisians will never hear of

them again. They had long previously been preparing for flight, and on leaving the auction rooms they bolted. Claudine Rissler has gone to Russia with Wladimir. She has taken Mariette with her, and Julia d'Orcival's tomb would be sorely neglected did not Berthe Lestérel take care of it. She often carries flowers there, and each day she prays to God for the unfortunate victim of the crime of the opera house. She also prays for her benefactress, Madame Cambry, whose memory she blesses, and for her unfortunate sister, whose daughter she will bring up as though she were her own. She still sometimes sings Martini's air, but she no longer saddens on reaching the last sentence, for she no longer fears that the prophecy will be accomplished. For her, the "sorrows of love" have lasted but a moment, and she hopes that her happiness will prove as durable as her life. Prébord has attained his object. He has married Miss Anna Smithson's five millions. Crozon has again taken command of a vessel, and the whales had better be upon their guard.

THE END.

